
A Step into The Past

Book 25

Huang Yi

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Chapter 01

Unpredictable Xiao Pan

Surrounded by his buddies such as Li Si and Lord Changwen, Xiang Shaolong returned back to Wu Residence. Seeing the Tian Sisters again, the three of them were ecstatic beyond words.

Xiang Bao'er just turned six and he is much stouter than the average kid. Clinging onto Xiang Shaolong, he asked one question after another and was pretty talkative, causing Xiang Shaolong to swell with fatherly pride.

Leading the entire clan, Wu Yingyuan prayed to their ancestors. That night, a banquet was hosted and the residence was decorated with numerous lanterns and red banners. It was a lively scene.

After drinking until his ears are red, Lord Changwen who was sitting opposite Xiang Shaolong chuckled: "The invincible Cao Qiudao is no longer invincible. After the duel at Qixia College Stargazing Platform, there is Shaolong the Sabre King who is evenly matched with Sword Saint. Let's see what else are the Six Eastern States capable of?"

At this juncture, Ji Yanran and Qin Qing led all the female members of the family in a toast, demonstrating their indebtedness for Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the other men who had served Qin by going into war. Xiang Shaolong and his men hurriedly returned the toast.

Noticing Zhou Wei, who had married Wu Guo, among the ladies, Xiang Shaolong was reminded of her brother Zhou Liang and King Eagle who died serving the country. He grieved: "At pity that Brother Zhou Liang..."

Zhou Wei's countenance turned grey. Lowering her head, she gently consoled: "Late Brother's greatest wish is to successfully train a King Eagle and deploy it in battle, assisting the army in securing victory. Now that his dream has come true, he would have died without any regrets. Great General need not bear any grudges for his death is certainly a peaceful one."

Finishing her sentence, her eyes began to turn reddish.

Everyone is conscious that Xiang Shaolong emphasizes a lot on relationships and hastily tried to change the topic. Jing Jun's wife and the mother of their daughter, Lu Dan'er quizzed: "Is Great General staying in Xianyang or leaving for the farms?"

Li Si joked: "Madam Jing must be really forgetful. Others may address Shaolong as Great General but you should address him as Third Brother or Third Brother in law instead."

The crowd breaking out into laughter, Lu Dan'er vented her anger on Jing Jun. Viciously glaring at him, she scolded in a low voice: "It's all your fault!"

Her words triggered even more laughter and the entire hall was filled with happiness, effectively diluting the earlier ambience of sorrow.

At the end of the banquet, the guests bade farewell and subsequently took

their leave.

After their departure, the leaders of the Wu Family gathered together in a secret room for a meeting.

During Xiang Shaolong's absence, all the external matters of the Wu Family were actually handled by the wise Ji Yanran. She inadvertently became the only female participant.

Tao Fang started the ball rolling: "It is wonderful to have Shaolong back. After several rendezvous with Tu Xian, it is ascertained that Lu Buwei and Lao Ai were in cahoots and their apparent enmity is staged. Additionally, with Empress supporting them from behind, their prowess is significantly boosted. Due to Lu Buwei's incitement, Lao Ai is spending most of his time at Yongdu. His resident palace, clothing, carriages and lifestyle is comparable to that of a King. Moreover, any document that requires Empress's Seal of Authority will have to be vet by these two traitors.

Ji Yanran nodded: "Due to the influence of Empress, Yongdu is as good as the territory of Lao Ai. With Lu Buwei as an inactive partner, they are forming secret gangs that are made up of desperados from different States, preparing to create chaos during Crown Prince's July coronation. This is a troubling development."

Xiang Shaolong reassured: "Some time ago, Crown Prince has planted the capable Mao Jiao as a spy within Lao Ai's camp. Thus, he possesses full knowledge of his traitorous activities. Moreover, he has secretly summoned Wang Jian back to Xianyang and is preparing for a showdown with Lao Ai."

Teng Yi violently shuddered: “Now that Shaolong is back; why did he summon Wang Jian?”

Xiang Shaolong fell into a daze as this thought never crossed his mind. His own heart began to turn cold.

Everyone is now gazing at him.

Jing Jun wondered: “Since Crown Prince personally informed Third Brother about this, there shouldn’t be a problem right?”

Her pretty eyes flashing with a complicated look, Ji Yanran melancholically sighed with a breath. She cautioned: “Whenever it comes to a power tussle or brothers fighting for the throne, all family ties are discarded. Hubby poses a threat because you are able to win the hearts of the people; just by witnessing the citizens of Qin celebrating your homecoming by cheering at the two sides of the street at your return, it is as clear as day.”

Wu Guo furiously recapped: “If not for Young Master fighting hard and protecting this country, Crown Prince will not be who he is today. How can he...”

With a dry cough, Wu Yingyuan interrupted him: “Stop your nonsense. Wu Guo, you never learn your lesson, do you? After the ungrateful treatment by Zhao, you are still as naïve as ever. Right now, Shaolong is as good as another Bai Qi. Do you still remember how Bai Qi ended up!”

Pausing, he added: “Fortunately, years ago, we had already decided to move

to the borders and build our own kingdom. We are at the last leg of our preparations. Once we kill Lu Buwei, we will leave Qin immediately. Shaolong shall be our overall chief in charge.”

Tao Fang dryly coughed too: “Recently, there is an unknown group spreading rumours, asserting that Crown Prince is neither the son of the late king or Lu Buwei but someone Shaolong that Shaolong has secretly manifested. Hey, this is truly absurd.” Glancing at Xiang Shaolong with a strange expression, Ji Yanran lowered her lovely face and her body language became unnatural. Teng Yi, who knows the real truth, wondered out loud: “Are the people convinced by these rumours?”

With a serious expression, Tao Fang professed: “Within Qin, unless they are having an ulterior motive, everyone believes that Crown Prince is the rightful and authentic son of heaven. These preposterous rumours cannot shake their beliefs. I am only concerned that this will cause Crown Prince some discomfort!”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “As per Father in Law’s comments, we, the Wu Family, can no longer allow our fate to be determined by other parties. We must hold the key to our own destiny.” Following that, they analyzed several details on how to fully retreat from Qin before everyone retired to their bedrooms.

Ji Yanran instead pulled Xiang Shaolong to the garden for a stroll. This gorgeous beauty with matching intelligence quizzed: “Does Hubby feel that Crown Prince has changed a lot over the past two years?”

Admiring the bright moon, Xiang Shaolong sighed: “As the leader of a State, who can afford to stay stagnant?”

Ji Yanran praised: “Well said! Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Isn’t this your famous warning mantra? Now that Crown Prince’s authority is growing day by day, his character has become even more unfathomable and unpredictable. Aye! Li Si has changed a lot too and is no longer as close to our Wu Family as before. If Shaolong were to treat other people with the same frankness as before, it will be very easy for you to get cheated.

Xiang Shaolong was still in a daze when Ji Yanran lowered her head and confessed: “It was Tingfang who told us!”

Xiang Shaolong gawked at her with amazement.

With a wronged expression, Ji Yanran shot him a look and acknowledged: “Back then, we just received news about your defeat in battle and subsequent disappearance. In her anxiety, Tingfang told me about Crown Prince’s secret and is certain that Crown Prince will do his best to save you because of it. Therefore, you should not blame her. Aye! I did not expect you to keep me, your wife, in the dark.”

His face beginning to change colour, Xiang Shaolong demanded: “Who else knows about this?”

Ji Yanran replied: “Of course Zhi Zhi knows about it too but I have instructed her to keep it strictly confidential. Shaolong ah! If not for this matter, regardless of all the rumours, it will not affect the relationship between you

and Crown Prince. However, it is an entirely different situation now. Shaolong cannot afford to let your guard down.”

Shaolong nodded: “I appreciate Yanran’s reminder. All along, I was mentally prepared for this. It’s late. Let’s return to our rooms and sleep!”

The next day, the three men Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun woke up before dawn in order to attend morning court. Arriving at the Court of Qin, Xiang Shaolong noticed Lu Buwei around and even Lao Ai had rushed over from Yongdu to be present. He instantly smelled a rat.

Spotting Xiang Shaolong, several officials come over to him and exchanged greetings. They were fidgeting restlessly, as if they wanted to say something but eventually chose to hold back.

Squeezing to the side of Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai pulled him to a corner for a private conversation. He commented: “Empress and I are so worried after hearing that Shaolong met with a disaster.”

Of course Xiang Shaolong knew that he is lying and cannot be bothered to expose him. Acting grateful, he thanked: “I appreciate Brother Lao’s and Empress’s concern.”

Out of the blue, Lao Ai moved closer to him and whispered in a suppressed voice: “Over the past few months, there is an unknown group spreading rumours, claiming that Crown Prince is not the son of the late king but someone that Shaolong had created. As a result, I approached Empress to verify this. After further discussion, we decided to search for the couple from

Handan who had raised Crown Prince and invite them to Xianyang in order to clear the air.”

Putting up an air of indifference, Xiang Shaolong yawned: “And what’s the outcome?”

His eyes glowing frostily, Lao Ai stared at Xiang Shaolong and continued: “We discovered that one and a half years ago, the Zhang Li couple and dozens of their neighbouring households were burnt to death in a huge fire. Regardless of age or gender, four hundred lives were lost and no one from that district survived the inferno. This case has taken Handan by the storm and is now classified as one of their mystery cases.”

Xiang Shaolong’s hands and feet instantly turned cold and his mind went blank. Momentarily, he did not know what to think or do or say.

Lao Ai’s voice seemed to be reverberating from afar: “Earlier, I brought this up to Imperial Uncle and he mentioned that Shaolong told him about Crown Prince fetching the Zhang Li Couple back to Xianyang for a blissful retirement. But how did matters turned out like this?”

Even with his quick wits, Xiang Shaolong was dumbfounded. Luckily, the court bell rang and the various officials hurriedly scampered to their seats. With a ‘How strange!’ reply, Xiang Shaolong hastily slipped away.

Perching high up on his dragon throne, Xiao Pan received the respects paid by his numerous civil and military officials. Xiang Shaolong is still in a state of apprehension as his mind is occupied with Lao Ai’s earlier shocking

revelation.

He did guess that Xiao Pan would murder the Zhang Li couple, as dead men tell no tales. But never in his wildest dreams would he expect the entire district to be burnt to the ground. From this episode, it clearly demonstrates Xiao Pan's ruthlessness in preserving his secret and Xiang Shaolong would not find it surprising if the arsonists are killed by Xiao Pan after their successful mission.

In the heart of Xiao Pan, only Xiang Shaolong and Wu Tingfang know about his authentic background. Will he cast aside his gratitude towards them and seal their lips with death in order to tie up all the loose ends once and for all?

After being betrayed by his group of buddies in Lin Zi, Xiang Shaolong has gained a deeper understanding of human psychology.

Xiao Pan is definitely different.

Xiang Shaolong came to this conclusion as he witnessed Xiao Pan sitting on his dragon throne and glaring at his officials with a condescending attitude as he praised Xiang Shaolong for resolving the chaos caused by Pu Hu.

By his opening address for the morning court, Xiang Shaolong can tell that Xiao Pan has learnt the art of utilizing his dominance and the use of compliments to win the hearts and minds of his officials.

Following the speech, Lu Buwei presented his lengthy report about his Lin Zi trip. Halfway through, Xiao Pan gestured for him to stop. Frowning, he

interrogated: “What kind of person is Tian Jian? After his appointment, can Tian Dan maintain his hold on power?”

His long thesis being harshly disrupted by Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei’s face revealed a look of annoyance. In a deep voice, he answered: “Tian Jian and Tian Dan are not worthy of our attention. Our only fear is an alliance between Qi and Chu. Tian Jian is able to secure the title of Crown Prince because the people of Chu are secretly backing him. Therefore, I...”

With an impatient tone, Xiao Pan interrupted him again: “Is Tian Jian an ambitious and striving person or is he another weakling who indulges in greed and pleasure?”

Xiang Shaolong is filled with admiration.

Xiao Pan has truly changed, changing to a man who seeks truth from facts and do not entertain empty talk. Based on his words, Xiao Pan gave everyone the impression that he is only interested in the stark reality.

Momentarily stunned, Lu Buwei frowned: “This matter requires further observation.”

Shifting his gaze to Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan’s tone became gentle and respectful. He checked: “Can Great General solve this puzzle for Guaren(me, your ruler)?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. With just a few words from him, the fate of Qi would be sealed. And it would naturally comprise the fates of his beloved

Shan Rou and his good friend Xie Ziyuan.

However, he could not avoid this question, especially during this period when his relationship with Xiao Pan is an ambiguous one. Inhaling a deep breath, he solemnly described: “Currently, Tian Jian can be considered as the acting King of Qi because he has the ultimate say in everything. Of course he would wish to accomplish something notable during his reign; however, he is deeply influenced by Qi’s culture of empty talk and is blinded towards the pressing issues of the State. He is eager to maintain good ties with us and no longer possess the mindset of Henggong’s ‘Nine Marquis Collaboration to rule the world’.”

Slapping the armrest of his dragon throne with considerable might, Xiao Pan sighed: “Great General’s analysis had sufficed well. Where is my Chief Officer?”

Li Si muttered a reply and stepped forward. Holding his scepter, he kowtowed and proclaimed: “At your command!”

Xiao Pan decreed: “Proceed without delay. Get Guaren an eloquent speaker and select a troupe of pretty and talented song & dance courtesans. Send them to Lin Zi for Tian Jian as a form of congratulations for his new title of Crown Prince. At the same time, add some congratulatory words on Guaren’s behalf.”

Li Si accepted the assignment and returned to his seat.

Xiao Pan let out a long laughter: “Since the coming of Henggong, Qi and our

Great Qin has always been locking horns with each other. The Three States, Chu and Yan are either fighting alongside us against Qi or fighting us alongside Qi. This matter must come to a conclusion sooner or later. Of course we will only take them on after conquering the Three States and Chu.”

Under the leadership of Wang Wan, the officials of Qin broadcasted their endorsement.

Their faces frozen with terror, Lu Buwei and Lao Ai kept quiet.

Xiang Shaolong could comprehend the situation. Xiao Pan is intentionally showcasing his authority and foresight to the officials, reminding them who is the genuine ruler of Qin. Concurrently, he is publicly causing Lu Buwei to lose face, indirectly coercing him and Lao Ai to swell with rebellious thought.

At this juncture, Lu Buwei suddenly winked at Lao Ai who is sitting beside him and the latter consequently made a secret hand gesture at a civil official named Qian Zhi who was sitting several seats away.

Qian Zhi wavered on the spot for some time before stepping forward. He kowtowed and avowed: “Subordinate has something to report to Crown Prince.”

The Court instantly quietened.

Seated beside and one level higher than Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping leaned towards his ear and whispered: “He works for Lao Ai. Due to Empress’s backing, he rose from a lowly official to senior civil official within

one promotion.”

With much tolerance, Xiao Pan calmly approved: “Official Qian, please speak!”

His lips trembled twice before Qian Zhi enunciated in a fearful voice: “Recently, there are rumours spreading around Xianyang which contains illogical nonsense that are aimed at damaging the prestige of Crown Prince. After subordinate’s inspection, I established that these bewitching slanders to be rather detrimental and therefore, subordinate seeks Crown Prince’s permission to conduct a investigation...”

Xiao Pan icily interrupted him: “What slanders are Official Qian referring to? Guaren does not comprehend.”

His face swiftly drained of blood, Qian Zhi knelt down on the floor and forcefully kowtowed, begging: “Subordinate dare not say it.”

Xiao Pan heatedly bellowed: “You don’t even have the guts to tell me the rumours; how can Guaren trust you to manage the affairs of the State?”

Sensing that the situation is becoming unfavourable, Lao Ai gave Lu Buwei a nudge.

A helpless Lu Buwei secretly cursed Qian Zhi’s incompetence and dryly coughed once. When he was about to say something, Xiao Pan already hollered: “Nobody is allowed to speak up on behalf of this nincompoop. Quick, tell Guaren the truth about the rumours.”

By now, Qian Zhi has kowtowed with so much strength that his head is broken and bloody. In a quivering voice, he stammered: “The rumours claimed that Crown Prince is not the son of the late king... .. Subordinate deserves death.”

Breaking out into laughter, Xian Pan derided: “I see.”

His royal complexion darkening the next second, Xiao Pan resentfully admonished: “Rumours vanished in the presence of the wise. The six eastern States are terrified of us and intentionally generated this slander in order to defame Guaren. Qian Zhi, how dare you assume these rumours to be true and even claim that it is affecting our citizens?”

Qian Zhi was frightened out of his wits and tragically cried: “Subordinate did not believe these rumours. Subordinate... ..”

Xiao Pan exploded: “Get this fool to the palace gate and behead him at once. His clansmen shall be conscripted to the border army and his clanswomen shall become prostitutes for the official brothels.”

Under the horrified expression of the officials, a wretched Qian Zhi continued to beg nonstop for mercy as he was inhumanely dragged out by the fierce and emotionless palace guards of Lord Changwen, leaving only a pool of blood from his broken head at the centre of the Court.

The look on the faces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai is exceedingly dreadful.

Within the Court, one can hear a pin drop as everyone was flabbergasted at

Xiao Pan's unpredictable illustration of authority.

In a few months time, Xiao Pan will officially be coronated as the King of Qin. No one would dare to offend him at this point in time.

Xiang Shaolong can feel the entire length of his spine tingling with fear.

Xiao Pan's makeover is truly overbearing.

Recomposing himself, Xiao Pan plainly questioned: "Now that these baseless rumours have found their way to our Court, what does Imperial Uncle think we should do to manage it?"

Lu Buwei has calmed down as well. In a deep voice, he suggested: "Crown Prince is right. Rumours vanished in the presence of the wise. By simply ignoring them, the slanders would eventually cease to exist."

Xiao Pan shook his head faintly, indicating his disagreement with Lu Buwei's proposal. To the crowd, he enquired: "Is there any other good recommendations from my officials?"

Seated at the side of Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping uttered: "Showtime."

Stepping forward, he advocated: "In subordinate's opinion, this matter must be swiftly nipped in the bud. I propose Crown Prince to issue a decree, forbidding our citizens to propagate this slander either publicly or privately. The clan of the offender shall share the same guilt and any whistle blowers shall be generously rewarded. These measures would certainly herald the

end of these fabrications.”

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened, recognizing that Xiao Pan, Li Si, Lord Changping and other intimate officials had secretly arranged for this scenario, planning to employ heavy-handed methods to quell these falsifications in a quick and efficacious manner.

Xiao Pan cheerfully granted: “Subordinate’s proposition sits well with me. Guaren is due for coronation. Thus, whoever that discusses this issue, regardless of official post, will be deemed as troublemakers and will be beheaded without pardon.”

Successively, he stridently thundered: “Court dismissed!”

The scores of officials briskly kneeled down on the floor, respectfully sending off this Crown Prince whose influence is rising rapidly.

After Xiao Pan’s departure, Xiang Shaolong was about to leave when Lord Changping held him back, stating: “Crown Prince wishes to see you.”

Chapter 02

Preparing For A Rainy Day

With his hands behind his back, Xiao Pan was standing in front of a large window in the study. With his back facing the door, Xiao Pan plainly state: “Guaren wishes to speak with Great General in private. The others can wait outside the door.”

Li Si and Lord Changping obediently acknowledged his order and retreated from the room. Upon their exit, the attendant closed the study door at the back of Xiang Shaolong.

Without paying his respects, Xiang Shaolong nonchalantly strode over to the back of Xiao Pan, enquiring in a low voice: “Is Crown Prince the mastermind behind the Great Fire of Handan which killed a few hundred people?”

Xiao Pan sighed with a breath of air: “Guaren didn’t have a choice; otherwise, right now, it wouldn’t be Guaren executing someone but someone executing the both of us.”

Xiang Shaolong did not know how to counter him.

From a practical point of view, Xiao Pan’s cruel method is indeed necessary and effective. Even he himself could not think of a better or cleaner way to wrap this up.

Xiang Shaolong felt directly responsible for the hundreds of lives lost.

If he did not get Xiao Pan to impersonate Yingzheng, perhaps this calamity can be avoided.

He is now deep-seated with regrets!

Maybe this is fate.

This is the first time he is feeling remorseful for personally grooming this one in a million Qin Shihuang.

Xiao Pan gently coaxed: "Presently, Master is my only kin. Please do not be upset with me. Without Great General's support, Guaren will be so lonely."

By addressing Xiang Shaolong and himself as Master and me, followed by Great General and Guaren, Xiao Pan has unconsciously generated an extremely dramatic effect.

Within that split second, Xiang Shaolong experienced Xiao Pan's astounding development from a mischievous kid to the earth-shattering Qin Shihuang, causing his mind to turn turbulent.

Activating his immense willpower to suppress his churning emotions, Xiang Shaolong openly declared: "Today, subordinate is here to say goodbye to Crown Prince. Later in the day, subordinate shall return back to the farms and await patiently for the coronation ceremony."

Xiao Pan violently quivered: “Till now, Great General is unable to comprehend Guaren’s difficulties?”

Shaking his head, Xiang Shaolong laughed: “Why would I blame you? In fact, on the political stage, you have done much better compared to all the kings in the past. Under the sky, who can hold a candle to you?”

Exhaling a heavy breath of air, Xiao Pan turned around and his royal eyes were glowing with a never-seen-before aura. In a frantic tone, he insisted: “There is four months to go before I will be officially crowned. If Master is willing to forgive me, then please assist me in getting rid of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai’s factions.”

His heart softening, Xiang Shaolong sighed: “With Wang Jian around, am I, Xiang Shaolong, still needed?”

The corner of his mouth curling to form an attractive and charming smile, Xiao Pan shook his head and clarified: “Master is mistaken. I summoned Wang Jian back because it is time to have him back anyway. Moreover, should Master meet with misfortune in Qi, Guaren can instantly get Wang Jian to avenge Great General.”

After a short contemplation, Xiang Shaolong explained: “Subordinate wishes to return to the farms because I wish to get some respite and also spend time with my wives and son. Crown Prince can refrain from thinking otherwise.”

Xiao Pan was amused: “In this world, only Great General has the guts to tell Guaren to refrain from thinking otherwise. If it was somebody else, he would

not have the courage to say so.”

Subsequently, he interrogated with a serious demeanor: “Is Great General intending to migrate to the northern borderlands after Guaren’s coronation?”

Suspiciously eyeing the overbearing aura radiating from Xiao Pan’s royal eyes, Xiang Shaolong maintained in a deep voice: “This is subordinate’s greatest dream. Crown Prince had better not get in my way.”

Xiao Pan bitterly laughed: “Great General is the only person Guaren dare not offend. What else can Guaren say? For the time being, Guaren only has one request: I want you to get rid of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai for Guaren.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “All right! Subordinate shall return to Xianyang in one month’s time and begin preparing for a showdown with them.”

With Jing Jun and Teng Yi accompanying him, Xiang Shaolong rode to the top of the tallest hill overlooking the farms. Varying his gaze from near to far, he relished in the scenery of Spring.

Wherever he looked, it was as beautiful as a painting. Camels, horses, cows and goats are roaming freely on the vast grasslands, contentedly consuming the bountiful, thick grass and clear water the fertile soil provides.

Slightly obscured by the thin mist that forms every dawn, the outline of the faraway mountains is faintly discernable. Coupled the rising and falling landscape of the nearby hills and valleys, on top of their lush greenery, it

resembles some kind of 3D effect. Once a while, a waterfall is sighted in between the hills and their cascading water breathes even more life into the picturesque view.

Peering at a flock of birds flying across the horizon, Teng Yi sighed: “They are finally coming home.”

Gazing at Ji Yanran, Lu Dan’er, Shan Lan and the other ladies riding horses and having fun below them with Xiang Bao’er and the other children, Xiang Shaolong was comforted: “Venturing out to war this time round, my biggest takeaways are not the accomplishments on the battlefield but it was learning two important lessons of life.”

An enthusiastic Jing Jun probed him to go on.

Xiang Shaolong begun: “Firstly, I have learnt how to make peace with defeat. Just when you thought victory is in your grasp, the unexpected can always happen and reward you with defeat instead.”

Still feeling apprehensive, Teng Yi agreed: “Li Mu is truly the God of War. With him around, our armies can forget about invading Zhao.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “On the battlefield, Li Mu is invincible and even Wang Jian may not be his match. Nonetheless, an open attack is easy to defend but a hidden weapon is hard to guard against. There will come a day when he will meet his demise at the hands of his own muddle-headed king and traitorous officials. Such is the never-changing end result for generals who have achieved the most merits for their kingdoms.”

Teng Yi was incredulous: “Shaolong seems to be speaking with a great deal of emotion. Can you enlighten us further?”

Xiang Shaolong added: “That is exactly what I learnt from my Lin Zi trip and also the second lesson. In politics, there is no code of brotherhood. For the sake of one’s survival and State, even the best friends and buddies can be betrayed.”

An expression of deep contemplation was revealed on the faces of Teng Yi and Jing Jun.

Xiang Shaolong advised: “As a result, we must make preparations for a rainy day. Otherwise, when disaster strikes, we would end up losing all our hard-won possessions due to our state of confusion. The circumstances are ever unpredictable and life is full of ups and downs. It is better to be safe than sorry.”

At this juncture, a lone Ji Yanran was riding up the hill to join them and coincidentally overheard the last two sentences of Xiang Shaolong. She praised: “Hubby’s two sentences are truly thought-provoking and comprise deep connotations. Yanran can put my mind at ease after hearing it!”

His heart swelling with limitless tenderness, Xiang Shaolong looked over to Ji Yanran who is approaching his side. With his heroic aura increasing by leaps and bounds, he swore: “We must finish our last fight with a bang. Not only must we take out Lu Buwei, we must also extract ourselves from here in one piece and proceed to the borderlands, living in tranquility for the rest of our lives.”

Teng Yi cautioned: “However, if Crown Prince has the intention to get rid of us, he can do so without any reservations. Countering him is not going to be easy.”

Jing Jun was flabbergasted: “Is there really such a possibility?”

To Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran guided: “I think Hubby should honestly tell Little Jun why this is a possibility! Otherwise, Little Jun may not comprehend the actual danger and it may give rise to unforeseen danger.”

His face losing colour, Jing Jun stammered: “In this case, the rumours must be true.”

Xiang Shaolong slowly nodded his head and told him about Xiao Pan’s heritage. He instructed at the end: “You must preserve this secret at all costs. Little Jun must not breathe a word of it to anyone else, including Dan’er.”

Exhaling a breath of cold air, Jing Jun recounted: “Thinking of that day when Crown Prince angrily beheaded Qian Zhi, I am more than convinced that he will sacrifice anything in order to maintain his hold on the throne.”

In a deep voice, Xiang Shaolong wondered: “For my entire life, people have been constantly deceiving me and I suspect Crown Prince is guilty of that as well. Have the three of you heard of the story: Cunning hares gone, dogs are cooked?”

Even Ji Yanran who is well versed with all kinds of literature does not know about the story. In a daze, she asked: “What is it about?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly scolded himself for divulging too much of his modern knowledge. He explained: "When all the wild hares have been hunted and devoured, the hunter would have nothing to hunt and would cook the hunting dogs to satisfy his hunger. Presently, we are embroiled in a similar situation. When the factions of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are annihilated, we would become the hunting dogs. To make it worse, we are the ones who knows about Crown Prince's secret background and will pose a threat to the stability of his rule."

Teng Yi nodded: "Hearing these thoughts of Third Brother, I, Second Brother, can put my mind at ease. Should we try to leave earlier? Without us, Lu Buwei will still meet a terrible ending."

Xiang Shaolong disagreed: "If we were to leave at once, I guarantee none of us will be able to meet Big Brother alive."

The three of them were instantly stunned.

Shifting his gaze to the faraway horizon, Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "I personally raised him and no one knows about his willpower as much as I do. Back when he was just a teen, he hatched a plan to kill Zhao Mu with his own hands and afterwards, he would still brag about it. If I am not mistaken, within our Wu Family, there must be someone who cannot resist the temptation and has agreed to become his spy. As a result, none of our activities can escape his detection."

His eyes blazing with a chilling aura, Jing Jun cursed: "If I discover who is the traitor, I will kill him at once without any hesitation."

Ji Yanran suggested: “Deceit can run both ways. If we manage to find out who is the spy, we can use him to mislead our enemy.”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “The best time for us to run away is the heaven-sent day when Crown Prince is away in Yongdu fighting against the rebels. After that day, trying to escape will be much more challenging.”

Teng Yi burst out laughing: “My sentiments exactly.”

Xiang Shaolong deliberated: “Crown Prince’s main concern is me as an individual. As long as I am here, he would not obstruct the others from leaving. Let’s exploit this circumstance and send most of our people away to the borderlands, including Tingfang and Bao’er. Crown Prince will find it hard to disagree because at least, on the surface, he has promised to let me leave.”

Ji Yanran frowned: “But when it is time for us to leave, it would not be so easy.”

Xiang Shaolong questioned Jing Jun: “How many warriors are we left with in the Wu Family?”

Jing Jun replied: “Adding the men from my village and subtracting those who perished on the battlefield, we have about two thousand and one hundred men. We will require substantial manpower to protect the women and children on the way to the borderlands. There won’t be much warriors left!”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: “The more men we have, the harder it is to

flee. Three hundred men will suffice. However, they must be the cream of the crop and their loyalty must be above question. Second Brother and Fifth Brother, please see to it! If our forces are limited, Crown Prince may lessen his guard against us.”

Ji Yanran muttered: “Hubby, did it cross your mind that when dealing with those rebels, Crown Prince would certainly activate the fierce army of Qin and completely surround the perimeter of Yongdu and Xianyang? With our limited numbers and faced with unanticipated changes, how can we hope to successfully exonerate ourselves?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly rationalized: “If Crown Prince wishes to kill me, he has to do so himself. Do you think he can simply instruct Fourth Brother, Lord Changping, Huan Qi or the others to come after me? What would be his excuse? The only way is to push the blame to Lu Buwei or Lao Ai. For example, he can get Mao Jiao to indirectly get rid of me as he is supposedly working for Lao Ai. When left with no other choice, he would personally lead an army after me. After taking me down, he can easily falsify a criminal act on me.”

Teng Yi warned: “Third Brother’s analysis is very thorough. However, if Crown Prince is bent on killing us and we have a spy among ourselves, we will be at a serious disadvantage.”

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong changed the topic: “Can we arrange some secret preparations around the farm? In case of contingencies, we could retreat here and hide ourselves before finding another way to leave? Firstly, we can avoid the ambush of the Qin military and we can also trick Crown

Prince into thinking that he can secretly kill us over here.”

Ji Yanran sighed: “Digging a tunnel is the best way to escape. The problem is, how do we keep it a secret?”

Suddenly, her petite frame lightly shuddered: “Yanran has found a way.”

The three men joyfully look at her.

Pointing to the southeast corner edge of the farm where there is a mausoleum which houses the tablets of Lady Ni and the others ladies. Ji Yanran proposed: “Using renovating the mausoleum as an excuse, we can secretly build a tunnel as long as we only engage the men from Little Jun’s village as well as the followers of Yanran. Except for the deities and spirits, no one would be wiser.”

Xiang Shaolong was troubled: “The problem is, Crown Prince is aware of our brilliant strategizing skills. If he were to position scouts at the nearby hilltops before attacking us, they could easily spot and catch up to us. Moreover, there is only four months until the coronation and there is insufficient time to build a tunnel that is really long and useful.”

Jing Jun offered another plan: “This is easily resolved. In the past when I was still a kid, we would hide in a cave whenever we lose in a fight against the kids from the neighbouring village. In the same context, after we come out from the tunnel, we can hole up in a secret hiding place for a few days. Once the invading army has retreated, we can quietly slip away. You can count on me to take care of this.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed: "Please act on it at once."

That afternoon, under the leadership of Wu Yingyuan, a top level Wu Clan meeting was conducted. After finalizing all the details of their retreat, Xiang Shaolong emptied his mind and indulged himself in a lifestyle of happiness with his family.

His unfortunate encounters over the past two years felt like a dream.

Nevertheless, he is still in dreamland because whenever he thought of himself in the 21st century, he felt as if he is trapped in this amazing dream.

Three days later, Qin Qing came to visit.

Xiang Shaolong could not hold back and hugged her firmly in his arms to compensate her for her longing and pining.

Qin Qing was shy by nature and with Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Ji Yanran and the Tian sisters peeping at the side, it exacerbated the situation. Unable to struggle out of his bear hug, she was so embarrassed even the roots of her ears turned red.

Ji Yanran and the others understandingly left the inner hall and allow the two of them to have a chance to speak in private.

Releasing the enchanting beauty from his hold, Xiang Shaolong pulled her to a corner and sat down with her. Stroking her in an affectionate manner, he observed: "Sister Qin has grown thin!"

Qin Qing lowered her head: "I came specially to look for you because I have something important to tell you."

Xiang Shaolong was in a daze: "What is so important?"

Batting her eyes once at him, Qin Qing put on a serious demeanor and articulated: "Recently, Crown Prince got his trusted follower to select a courtesan and began tutoring her in court etiquette. The entire process was extremely secretive. It was only pure coincidence that led me to discover it when I came across the royal tailors sewing new clothes for her."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "What is so special about that?"

Her face revealing an expression of fear, Qin Qing broke down in a quivering voice: "In terms of appearance and figure, this courtesan closely resembles Empress. Ah! Shaolong, I am so frightened!"

Xiang Shaolong opened his arms to envelope Qin Qing who is leaping into his bosom. His only reaction is a chilling sensation throughout his nervous system.

He instantly knew what is on Qin Qing's mind.

Xiao Pan has decided to kill Zhu Ji but no matter what, Zhu Ji is still his birth mother in the eyes of the public. Killing her is neither a filial nor righteous act. Thus, he had to make a switch and replace the real with a decoy. In the future, he can simply confine her substitute within the palace and easily conceal this horrifying truth from the citizens of Qin.

Qin Qing is shocked out of her wits because she did not know that Zhu Ji is not the real mother of Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan is no longer the Xiao Pan of the past. He has evolved into a brutal and merciless Yingzheng who will not hesitate to exterminate anything that stands between him and his goal.

Back then, he did promise he would not harm Zhu Ji. He is obviously renegeing on his word.

What can he, Xiang Shaolong, do?

He still harbours immense feelings of guilt and emotions towards Zhu Ji.

Given the present scenario, what can he do?

Qin Qing lamented in a melancholic voice: "Crown Prince has changed a lot."

Xiang Shaolong quizzed in a deep voice: "How does he treat you?"

Qin Qing answered: "He still treats me well and often chats me up. Nonetheless, I can sense a shift in his attitude towards you. In the past, he loves to talk about you in our conversations but ever since you came back from Lin Zi, he no longer brings you up in our discussions. Aye! Whenever he maintains his silence, I really cannot fathom what is going on in his mind."

His heart turning colder than before, Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Does he know that you are coming to the farms to look for me?"

Qin Qing groaned: “It is impossible to conceal anything from him. He even instructed me to bring some cakes to you.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I would rather die than eat his food.”

Qin Qing forcefully sat up with her back straightened. Her face losing colour, she probed: “Will he dare to harm you?”

Holding onto her fragrant shoulder, Xiang Shaolong gently consoled: “Don’t panic. The cakes are not poisonous. Tell me, if I am leaving for the borderlands, will you come along with me?”

Diving into his bosom again, Qin Qing wrapped her arms around his waist, declaring: “Even if you, Xiang Shaolong, has decided to go to the edge of the earth, Qin Qing will still want to be by your side. I will never have any regrets.”

Tightly hugging her curvaceous and aromatic body, Xiang Shaolong’s soul flew past countless rivers and mountains, finally stopping at the faraway fascinating and delightful vast grasslands.

Only there can he finally enjoy days of happiness that he has been waiting for for the past ten years.

Chapter 03

Xianyang Happenings

After residing for three days, Qin Qing returned to Xianyang.

Xiang Shaolong is now fully conscious of Xiao Pan's mindset: To protect his throne, he has no qualms about killing all that stands in his way.

Although it is uncertain if Xiao Pan will eventually come after himself, Xiang Shaolong decided to assume the worst after his Lin Zi experience.

He kept the habit of waking up every morning before dawn to practice his sabre play and even added archery to his training regime.

From the warriors of the Wu Family and Jing Village, he selected three hundred men which naturally include top experts like Wu Yan Zhe and Jing Shan. After specially arming them with chromium sabres and strong bows that were forged by Uncle Qing, Xiang Shaolong even went to the extent of imparting his flying needles skill to them. Day and night, they practiced nonstop.

In the meantime, Wu Yingyuan and the others started to leave the farm in batches. When it was time for Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Zhou Wei, Shan Lan, the Tian Sisters, Lu Dan'er and Xiang Bao'er to leave, everyone was filled with reluctance and the separation was an emotional one.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran accompanied the convoy for three days before returning back to the farm, which is now an uninviting and foreboding empty shell. They felt uneasy at this change of environment.

At dinnertime, Teng Yi remarked in a deep voice: "Wu Yingen should be the spy."

The others were stunned.

Wu Yingen is the third younger brother of Wu Yingyuan. Although he is against abandoning the life of luxury in Xianyang, no one would have expected that he would become the spy for Xiao Pan.

Ji Yanran wondered: "All along, I have paid extra attention to this man. However, why is Second Brother so confident that he is the spy?"

Teng Yi explained: "I was able to come to this conclusion because he insisted on staying behind to manage the farm and only leave with the last batch of personnel. This behavior contradicts his usual greedy and cowardly nature. Therefore, I placed him and his followers under surveillance and found out that he would secretly dispatch messengers to Xianyang. I informed Master Tao about it and instructed him to send stalkers after the messengers. True enough, the messengers would enter the palace by a hidden entrance to make their reports."

Jing Jun aggressively cursed: "I've never liked him."

Xiang Shaolong was comforted: "Fortunately, we took early precautions. But

with him around, it is quite troublesome for us to carry out our plans. Is there any technique that we can use to chase him and his men away?”

Ji Yanran contemplated: “He has merely been deceived into becoming a pawn for somebody else. Due to his craving for wealth and a materialistic lifestyle, he committed these acts of stupidity! If we can exploit his weaknesses and employ scare tactics, such as hinting him that by spying for Crown Prince, it is as good as making it easier for Crown Prince to attack us, I guarantee that he will wake up and realize what a fool he was.”

Teng Yi frowned: “You must exercise caution and don’t exacerbate the situation. If he were to report this to Crown Prince, Crown Prince would know that we are guarding against him.”

Her lovely eyes flashing with brilliance, Ji Yanran shrilly snorted: “If we send his wives, concubines and children away, what can he do besides obeying us? Leave this to Yanran.”

Noting that Ji Yanran is personally handling the affair, Xiang Shaolong can put his mind at ease. He checked: “We have to return to Xianyang tomorrow. Who is staying behind to oversee the farms?”

Ji Yanran bitterly laughed: “Let Ji Yanran stay back! Otherwise, Wu Guo may not be able to stand up to Third Master.”

Xiang Shaolong is most unwilling but also recognizes that this is the best arrangement. Time is running out and Xiao Pan will be coronated in three month’s time. All their preparations will come to fruition on that day.

Back at Xianyang, Xiang Shaolong's first move is to enter the palace and seek an audience with Xiao Pan.

As per normal, Xiao Pan received him in the Imperial Study and Li Si is present too.

After accepting Xiang Shaolong's paying of respect, Xiao Pan commanded: "Subordinate Li, give me your report on the happenings of Xianyang."

Li Si seems to be afraid of coming into contact with Xiang Shaolong's gaze. Lowering his head and flipping the documents in front of him, he narrated in a deep voice: "Lu Buwei is spending most of his time outside Xianyang. Using the excuse that he is supervising the last leg of Zhengguo Canal's construction, he was actually meeting up with the local officials all over Qin, trying to garner support from them in preparation for turmoil within the Court of Qin."

Xiang Shaolong intentionally tested him: "What about Guan Zhongxie?"

Still not looking in his direction, Li Si kept his head low and responded: "Guan Zhongxie was freshly dispatched by Crown Prince to the region of Han in order to pressurize them. Unless he disobeyed his orders, he should be far away from here during Crown Prince's coronation."

Xiao Pan plainly added: "This man's archery skills is too amazing. With him around, Guaren cannot eat or sleep in peace. Guaren has planted spies around him and should he do anything out of the ordinary, someone will kill him immediately with Guaren's secret decree."

Li Si quickly peeped at Xiang Shaolong once before lowering his head again, broadcasting: “The entire Yongdu has more or less landed in the hands of Lao Ai. With his thirty thousand followers, they have occupied every single official post in Yongdu.”

Xiao Pan sniggered: “Guaren is purposely allowing him to grow without any restrictions, indirectly numbing him to the real sense of danger. Afterwards, I will exterminate him and his cronies once and for all. Humph! I’ll just tolerate his willful lifestyle for a few more months!”

Looking directly at Xiang Shaolong for the first time, Li Si enlightened: “According to Crown Prince’s estimate, Lu Buwei will take advantage of Crown Prince’s trip to Yongdu and stage a rebellion simultaneously with Lao Ai, thereby gaining control of Xianyang. As the Imperial Infantry is still commanded by Xu Shang and Lord Changwen’s Imperial Guards would have to escort Crown Prince to Yongdu, it is possible for Lu Buwei to succeed in his endeavor.”

Xiao Pan added: “Both traitors Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are carrying the Seal of the Empress. Among the confusion, it is likely that some righteous officials would be misled by them and unknowingly end up as their accomplices.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “Leave Xianyang to me. I guarantee that Lu Buwei will end up in failure.”

Xiao Pan and Li Si exchanged looks of surprise.

After a long time, Xiao Pan insisted in a deep voice: “Without Great General

at the side of Guaren, how can Guaren be at ease? We can place Xianyang under the care of the two generals Teng Yi and Jing Jun. Great General must accompany Guaren to Yongdu.”

Xiang Shaolong had anticipated this reaction from him. Sighing to himself, he pretended to be unaffected and accepted: “Subordinate dare not disobey Crown Prince’s order.”

Frowning at Xiang Shaolong for some time, Xiao Pan then turned to Li Si and instructed: “Guaren wishes to speak privately with Great General.”

Not daring to look at Xiang Shaolong anymore, Li Si retreated from the room.

The study is now filled with an awkward silence.

Xiao Pan sighed with a breath of air: “Is Great General dissatisfied with Guaren? There are many occasions when Guaren is left without a choice and was forced by circumstances to undertake such extreme measures.”

Staring unblinkingly at Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong felt as if he is looking at a complete stranger. He lightly checked: “How does Crown Prince plan to deal with Empress?”

Without backing down at all, Xiao Pan matched his stare. Hearing his question, his eyes started to glow with a chilling aura as he icily hissed: “Till today, Great General is still speaking up for this wanton and corrupted lady who has destroyed the reputation of the Qin royalty?”

His own eyes glowing with a chilling aura too, Xiang Shaolong continued staring and frostily reminded: "This is subordinate's sole request for Crown Prince. I don't care who else you are going to kill but I hope you will take into account Empress's past relationship with you and let her off."

A flash of killing intent sparkled once in the royal eyes of Xiao Pan but it is unclear if it was directed at Zhu Ji or him, Xiang Shaolong. Recovering his tranquility, Xiao Pan decided in a deep voice: "If she stays in the palace and no longer intervene in State affairs, Guaren will not treat her shabbily. Is Great General satisfied?"

If not for Qin Qing leaking out the information of a Zhu Ji replacement, Xiang Shaolong may have believed his words. But right now, all he feels is a sense of disappointment.

If Xiang Shaolong is single and without any dependents, he would straightaway expose his lie in a full counteroffensive.

But remembering the lives of Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Ji Yanran, Wu Family and Jing Village all resting on himself, he had to swallow this ball of anger.

Serving a king is like walking with tigers. If one is not careful, it could result in personal death and clan annihilation.

This future Qin Shihuang is not easy to get along with.

His tone softening, Xiao Pan gently inquired: "Master do not trust me?"

Brimming with emotions, Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath of air before asserting in a deep voice: "Crown Prince is well prepared against the forces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. Why do you need me around? I might as well leave tonight!"

Xiao Pan thundered: "No!"

Xiang Shaolong's heart was shaken as well.

He was using these words to test Xiao Pan's response. At this moment, he has finally drawn a conclusion, and it is the most bone-chilling conclusion of all.

Xiao Pan inhaled a deep breath: "Master had promised to leave only after watching me become King. How can Master go back on your word."

He sighed with the same breath: "Don't you wish to kill Traitor Lu with your own hands?"

Xiang Shaolong is conscious that if he keeps persisting along this path, he can forget about leaving the palace alive. Pretending to be mentally and physically drained, he bitterly smiled: "If I keep my word, will Crown Prince keep yours too?"

Xiao Pan was annoyed: "Since when did Guaren fail to keep my word?"

Xiang Shaolong thought: The changes within these two years are really drastic. Xiao Pan and himself can no longer communicate with complete

honesty and trust. Now, both of them have to resort to mutual scheming and lying.

Of course Xiang Shaolong is not so stupid as to expose Xiao Pan's plan to create a fake Zhu Ji. He smiled: "If Crown Prince has nothing more to say, Subordinate wishes to return home for a rest."

Stepping out of the study, Li Si is still standing there. He saw Xiang Shaolong departing and whispered: "Let me send Great General off."

Xiang Shaolong guessed he has something to tell him and walked by his side. Surprisingly, Li Si did not say a single word during the long walk to the square.

Noticing Xiang Shaolong, Jing Shan and the others brought his horse over.

Li Si suddenly whispered: "Shaolong! Get out of here!"

He then left with a helpless expression on his face.

Inside his heart, Xiang Shaolong can feel a tsunami of emotions rising and they are unlikely to subside anytime soon.

Li Si is now the closest and most trusted official of Xiao Pan. Based on his intelligence, he should have a good grasp of Xiao Pan's intentions. As a matter of fact, from the clues that have popped up, it is not impossible for him to deduce Xiao Pan's real background and the genuine relationship between Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong. From these assumptions, he could foresee that Xiao Pan will eventually seek the extermination of him, Xiang

Shaolong.

Without Zhu Ji and Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan can preserve his Yingzheng identity forever.

Besides Zhu Ji and Xiang Shaolong, anyone else would not be as convincing or exert the same amount of influence.

Just as Xiang Shaolong rode out of the palace, someone called his name from behind.

Turning back, he saw Lord Changwen chasing up to him from the palace gate. Lord Changwen suggested: "Let's talk as we ride!"

Xiang Shaolong was incredulous: "What is it regarding? Don't you have to work?"

With a heavy expression, Lord Changwen interrogated: "Is Shaolong really leaving for the borderlands?"

Xiang Shaolong simply responded: "I am ill suited to be here, because I cannot stand acts of war and violence. You have known me for some time and you should have a clear idea of what kind of person I am."

Lord Changwen was quiet for a short spell, as if he wanted to say something but could not bring himself to say it. He finally disclosed: "Crown Prince doesn't seem too happy with your decision, saying that it will affect the morale of the military."

His heart aching once, Xiang Shaolong affirmed in a low voice: “You need not persuade me anymore. My only regret is not leaving two years ago. If I did, my recollections of Great Qin shall be the fondest as I race my horse across the vast grasslands.”

Completing his sentence, he squeezed the horse’s belly to increase his pace and sped away from a stunned Long Changwen who had reined his horse to a stop, leaving him far behind in a blink of an eye.

Ten over riders galloped like the wind, overtaking every horse or carriage that they encountered, racing down Xianyang’s highway at full speed with the sunset as a backdrop.

In this instance, Xiang Shaolong has given up all hope on Xiao Pan.

He has one major concern in his mind right now: How can he save Zhu Ji from the murderous clutches of Xiao Pan.

Ever since he came to this ancient warring period, he has to face all sorts of challenges on a daily basis, inadvertently training his willpower to be stronger than anybody else. Even when his opponent is Qin Shihuang, he does not possess the slightest nuance of fear.

But he would never underestimate Xiao Pan because he is the only person in this time period to have full knowledge of Xiao Pan’s fearsome character. In the annals of history, Qin Shihuang utilizes heavy-handed methods to exercise his authority throughout his empire. At the end of the day, the whole of China will bow down at his feet.

Ironically, this heavyweight historical character was personally fashioned by Xiang Shaolong himself.

Xiang Shaolong wished he could face the sky and shout with all his might in order to vent frustration in his heart.

But he would not do that.

Only by trudging on can he stay alive and travel to the borderlands to enjoy a new lease of blissful life.

If Zhu Ji is willing to follow him, Xiang Shaolong would definitely bring her along, using this opportunity to compensate her for his lies and years of guilt.

With just one leg stepping inside Wu Residence, Tao Fang had already begun pulling him towards the inner hall. Curious, Xiang Shaolong wondered: "What is it?"

In a secretive hush-hush manner, Tao Fang snickered: "Your old buddies are here!"

At this juncture, he was entering the inner hall and saw Teng Yi engaging two guests in a conversation. They turned out to be Tu Xian and Xiao Yuetan.

A thrilled Xiang Shaolong ran towards them. Holding the hands of both men, he was so overwhelmed with happiness he was momentarily speechless.

His eyes turning red due to a burst of strong emotions, Tu Xian clarified: "I

did not know that Yuetan is coming over to Xianyang so I did not inform you guys in advance.”

With the groove of his eyes wet as well, Xiao Yuetan grinned: “Elder Brother used Shaolong’s life as a gambling chip in Lin Zi; I trust Shaolong will not blame Elder Brother, right?”

Teng Yi laughed: “Since we won the gamble, of course!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Elder Brother’s confidence in me is even greater than the confidence I have in myself. Fortunately, I managed to run away fast enough from Cao Qiudao. Otherwise, I would not be able to hold hands and chit-chat with both of you today. This is called: Among the thirty-six stratagems, running away is a top stratagem.”

Everyone broke out into laughter.

Tu Xian sighed: “Well said. Running away is a top stratagem. Earlier, we were analyzing a plan to try and leave this forsaken place.”

Tao Fang chuckled: “Let’s sit down and discuss further!”

Once everyone is properly seated, Xiao Yuetan narrated: “My purpose in coming back to Xianyang is to witness Traitor Lu’s downfall with my own eyes. But after speaking with Brother Teng, I realized that Shaolong is in an unfavourable situation too.”

Laying his eyes on Xiao Yuetan, all the grievances in Xiang Shaolong’s heart

has disappeared without a trace and was replaced by a heroic aura. He cheerfully laughed: "A true hero is someone who can continue to stand tall in the face of trouble. With Brother Xiao assisting me, all my worries are gone with the wind."

Tu Xian was pleased: "Looking at Shaolong's overwhelming confidence, we are happy for you too. Regardless of the danger, we shall maintain our high morale. Now that Traitor Lu's destruction is certain, our only problem is how to safely reach the borderlands and enjoy the rest of our days in peace!"

Tao Fang added: "Earlier on, Manager Tu has made a detailed analysis of Traitor Lu's situation. The forces at his disposal include the Imperial Infantry, Guan Zhongxie's team, fifteen thousand family warriors and his partner-in-crime Lao Ai's camp. Although there are several officials who are in cahoots with him, they are of no use when real trouble strikes. If we plan our strategies and deployments well, we could force him to a corner and exact revenge on him."

Xiao Yuetan solemnly state: "The crux of the problem is: How can we take down Lu Buwei while guaranteeing a safe retreat."

Xiang Shaolong beamed: "Initially, I was troubled over this but now that Elder Brother is here, it is a different story altogether!"

Xiao Yuetan bitterly smiled: "Don't become over-reliant on me. For all you know, I may fall below your expectations."

Xiang Shaolong whispered: "Does Elder Brother have the confidence to

create another Xiang Shaolong?"

Everyone was stunned on the spot.

Xiang Shaolong gleefully explained: "Wu Guo is very talented when it comes to masquerading. In addition, his body build is quite similar to mine. If Elder Brother has a way to change his face to look like mine, I am sure we can deceive everyone and launch a stealth attack on our enemies."

As everyone gazed at him with anticipation, Xiao Yuetan contemplated for a short while before concluding: "This would be the greatest challenge for me, Xiao Yuetan. Despite the significant difficulties, I can guarantee that I will not disappoint Shaolong."

Slamming his palm on the table, Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: "With these words from Elder Brother, the circumstances have improved dramatically. The first person we must kill is Guan Zhongxie. With him dead, Lu Buwei is as good as a toothless tiger and his evil influence will be contained."

Teng Yi nodded his head in agreement: "That's right! If this man picks up his bow and arrows, we can expect heavy casualties."

Tao Fang reminded: "However, our main concern is not Lu Buwei but Yingzheng."

Xiang Shaolong simply clarified: "That is precisely why I needed another Xiang Shaolong."

The corner of Xiao Yuetan's mouth revealed a trace of a smile. Exchanging looks with Tu Xian first, he then laughing sighed: "Shaolong is truly formidable; you have deceived us thoroughly."

In this moment, Xiang Shaolong realized that Xiao Yuetan and Tu Xian had already inferred that Xiao Pan is not the real Yingzheng.

And it is also because of this reason that Xiao Pan is going all out to kill himself.

For those in the know, they would have guessed that Xiao Pan is acting this way because of a particular reason.

Only when Xiang Shaolong is dead can Xiao Pan solve the root of the problem and not live in constant fear of another identity crisis.

The showdown between him and Xiao Pan has long been decided by fate. Nobody can prevent this from happening.

Chapter 04

Hard To Differentiate Between Real And Fake

Over the next ten days, Xiang Shaolong attended Court as per normal but politely declined all entertainment engagements. Instead, he devoted all his time and energy in training his team of three hundred elite ‘Special Forces’ members.

Their equipment can be considered the best this era can offer, incorporating his modern 21st century design and was further improvised by Uncle Qing, the head of Yue’s blacksmith association, allowing them to become the living examples of the martial arts experts illustrated in Wuxia novels. Besides being proficient in all types of normal and hidden weapons, they are able to climb any wall and trespass any property, becoming what we would know as stealth ninjas.

On this evening, Ji Yanran and Wu Shu came over from the farms and they brought good news.

The gorgeous Talented Lady exclaimed: “Under my mixture of soft and hard tactics, Wu Yingen finally confessed that he has been supplying information to Crown Prince. However, he insisted that he was doing this for the sake of the Wu Clan as Crown Prince has instructed him to try and persuade us from leaving for the borderlands!”

Teng Yi icily smiled: “A traitor will always have his excuses!”

Ji Yanran explained: “Yanran did believe his words, because when Yanran pointed out that due to Hubby’s incredible accomplishments, influence and prowess, it is possible for Crown Prince to view Hubby as a threat and a target for extermination, he was so terrified his face turned green and his lips turned white. In the end, he disclosed the identity of the person liaising with him.”

Xiang Shaolong interrogated in a deep voice: “Who is it?”

Ji Yanran replied: “His correspondent is a man named Yao Jia. Does Hubby know him?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “He is the assistant of Li Si and he is responsible for communicating with the various States. He just came back from Qi and I would classify him as a very wise man.”

Ji Yanran added: “Third Master En has now recognized the severity of the situation and promised to cooperate fully with us. To be safe, Yanran has sent all his family warriors and followers to the borderlands, just in case Yao Jia has bribed them individually.”

Xiang Shaolong determined: “Wu Yingen’s greatest usefulness is that through him, we can dupe Crown Prince into thinking that we will only leave for the borderlands after everything has been completed.”

In a deep voice, Teng Yi reminded: “If I am this ungrateful brat, I will have you killed at Yongdu by the hands of Lao Ai. When that happens, I can use the excuse of avenging you and fully annihilate the forces of Lao Ai, killing two

bird with one stone.”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “No matter what, we must mislead him into believing that we will only leave after killing Lu Buwei.”

Turning to Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong proposed: “Yanran’s thinking is much more thorough than we, the two brothers. Can you try to fake some story and reveal it bit by bit to Yao Jia before the coronation? It would be good to make the story obscure, letting him slowly deduce and piece the jigsaw puzzle before guessing the final message that we want to pass to Crown Prince.”

Ji Yanran batted her eyes once at him, answering: “No need to flatter Yanran, I’ll just do my best!”

Teng Yi probed: “We would need to leave for Yongdu in two months time. Has Third Brother thought of a plan to kill Lu Buwei and simultaneously make a safe retreat?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “I want to see Zhu Ji before confirming the details.”

The two persons, Ji Yanran and Teng Yi were utterly shocked.

Teng Yi advised: “Lao Ai is now regarding you as a thorn in the flesh. If you go to Yongdu, you may get into trouble. Moreover, if Crown Prince knows about it, he would be more determined to kill you than ever.”

Ji Yanran also spoke up: “Empress is no longer the Empress of the past. She may even assume that you killed her real son in order to make the switch. It is really not appropriate for you to see her.”

Xiang Shaolong did not consider these points. His heart becoming uncomfortable, he turned speechless.

Patting his shoulder, Teng Yi consoled: “As long as we act with a clear conscience, it does not matter how others judge us!”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I wanted to see Zhu Ji and try to prevent her from getting killed is precisely because it is weighing on my conscience.”

To Ji Yanran, he implored: “Can you invite Sister Qing over? Through her, I can meet Zhu Ji in secret.”

Her exquisite face darkening, Ji Yanran furiously reprimanded: “Once you have decided on something, you would stubbornly follow it through. Zhu Ji has mothered two bastards for Lao Ai, do you really believe she will abandon her two sons and leave with you? Presently, we can barely fend for ourselves and here you are, trying to increase our burden. When Tingfang and Zhizhi are leaving, they did instruct me to watch over you and not let you participate in any dangerous activities. If you insist on meeting that lady, Ji Yanran seeks a divorce!”

Ever since Xiang Shaolong got to know Ji Yanran, this is the first time she is so fierce and upset. Petrified, he shuddered and dare not defend himself anymore.

Teng Yi nodded: "Today, Second Brother is not going to help you, especially when this concerns the life and death of the entire clan. No matter what, Third Brother has to listen to Yanran."

A helpless Xiang Shaolong had no choice but to agree.

Only then did Ji Yanran's anger subside.

Over the next few weeks, besides giving his full attention to training the three hundred men team, Xiang Shaolong also instructed Wu Guo on the finer tips of impersonating himself, for he must succeed in deceiving Xiao Pan, Li Si and the others who know Xiang Shaolong very well.

The only loophole is his voice. Luckily, Ji Yanran has an excellent idea: At a suitable time, Xiang Shaolong will start faking an illness. Therefore, even when his voice becomes deeper and hoarse, it will not arouse any suspicions. On top of that, he can do away with speaking less, thereby killing two birds with one stone.

That night, Xiao Yuetan came back from the farms and borrowed a set of Xiang Shaolong's official robes. Locking Wu Guo and himself inside a room, he has everyone patiently waiting outside, eager to find out how Wu Guo will eventually turn out.

Until now, everyone is still puzzled over Xiang Shaolong's decision to have Wu Guo masquerade as himself. Unable to tolerate the suspense, Jing Jun posed the question to him.

Xiang Shaolong responded: “Firstly, I want to deceive Lu Buwei. Crown Prince has decided to leave Xianyang under the care of Lu Buwei. Based on Lu Buwei’s character, he would use this opportunity to get rid of Second Brother and Fifth Brother, leaving me... YI!”

Ji Yanran, Teng Yi and Jing Jun were stupefied, staring at Xiang Shaolong whose face is suddenly drained of colour.

With a skeptical expression, Xiang Shaolong wondered: “Do you think Guan Zhongxie would employ the same technique and slip back to Xianyang? We are one month away from the coronation day and the current time frame is a critical period. Would he be contended to remain stationed far away?”

Teng Yi rationalized: “Without Brother Xiao’s talented hands, how can they create a fake Guan Zhongxie?”

Ji Yanran debated: “If Lu Buwei has the intention, it is not difficult to find someone who resembles Guan Zhongxie. By getting people to provide additional cover, like mistaking fish eye for pearls, it is highly possible for Hubby’s hypothesis to be right.”

To Tao Fang who had just arrived, Xiang Shaolong told him about his conjecture and added: “Please inform Manager Tu and ask him to pay special attention to this matter. If we can track Guan Zhongxie’s movements, he’ll be the first to go down, followed by Han Jie and the rest.”

Jing Jun quizzed: “Earlier, does Third Brother mean that he wishes to hoodwink Lu Buwei into thinking that Third Brother has accompanied Crown

Prince to Yongdu but is actually staying behind in Xianyang to counter him?”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “That is the main reason. In addition, I can carry out my plans without Crown Prince looking over my shoulder.”

Teng Yi reviewed: “Nevertheless, we must be extra meticulous in our deployment and find a way to get Wu Guo out of Yongdu. Otherwise, this kid may end up in a life-threatening situation.”

The voice of Xiao Yuetan resonated: “That’s the brilliant part of the plan. By simply reverting back to his original appearance, it will be quite easy for Wu Guo to make his getaway.”

As everyone looked over to the open doors of the room with anticipation, Xiao Yuetan and another ‘Xiang Shaolong’ slowly strode out, earning cheers and exclamations.

With the appearance of Xiang Shaolong, Wu Guo faced the crowd and sang an opera tune before striking a pose. Pretending to grab the hilt of an imaginary Hundred Battle Sabre, he roared: “Traitor Lu, on your knees! I, Xiang Shaolong, have been waiting for seven long years to finally cut off your smelly head!” Amazingly, even his tone and voice is quite similar to Xiang Shaolong’s.

The crowd instantly broke out into wild laughter and Tao Fang was laughing so hard he bent over and held onto his tummy.

Ji Yanran shrilly giggled: “This is impossible. How can the resemblance be so

striking?”

Wu Guo stared at Ji Yanran with a surprised expression. He mocked: “Wifey, you are so muddle-headed you cannot even recognise your hubby? Don’t blame me if I dump you.”

His teasing naturally got the entire hall laughing all over again.

Panting from her laughter, Ji Yanran threatened: “If you dare to dump me, I’ll kill you with a single sword slash.”

Watching the scene unfolding, Xiang Shaolong can feel his emotions stirring. For the past two years, the Wu Residence has not seen such a carefree and happy ambience that was filled with joy and laughter.

Putting on a frightened look, Wu Guo relented: “Wifey is so fierce. Hubby shall give in and apologise.”

Unwilling to continue the banter with him, Ji Yanran faced Xiao Yuetan and questioned: “Mister Xiao is truly the world’s number one make up artist. How did you create this miracle?”

As he lovingly admired his own handiwork, Xiao Yuetan lightly articulated: “It took me five days to sculpt Shaolong’s bust from wood. Afterwards, I concocted a skin mask using a special recipe to recreate the fake face. Finally, I touched up the colouring to the smallest details. Thereafter, another Xiang Shaolong is born.”

Jing Jun praised: “In the future, I would not dare to believe the outer appearance of anyone.”

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: “Without Wu Guo, even if I have three heads and six arms, my talents would be inapplicable. This fellow’s body figure is almost the same as Shaolong, except that his shoulder is not as broad. Thus, I have added padding to his clothes to conceal this loophole.”

Facing the sky and laughing out loud, Wu Guo took huge strides up and down the hall, mimicking Xiang Shaolong’s body language. It is really difficult to tell them apart.

The two men Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Yuetan are sitting within the hall. Admiring the beautiful, star-studded sky, they were overwhelmed with emotions.

Xiao Yuetan sighed: “Life is really baffling. Last time round, we were in Lin Zi, busy handling all sorts of people and dangerous situations. This time round, although we are back in Xianyang, we are again faced with the same scenario of trying to flee for our lives. But of course this round can be considered the last and final round. How wonderful!”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “With Elder Brother giving pointers by the side, I am extremely confident that we will be able to reach the borderlands safely and enjoy the life that we have been pining for so long.”

After a deep contemplation, Xiao Yuetan questioned in a serious tone: “We already knew that Yingzheng will not let Lu Buwei have a good ending and by

staying back, we have to put up with a certain amount of risk. Should we make plans to leave before the coronation instead? Wouldn't that save us plenty of trouble?"

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: "I did consider this too but discarded the notion because of two reasons. Firstly, the retreat of the entire clan would take some time to be completed. Secondly, I am concerned that Yingzheng has made secret preparations. If I displayed any signs of leaving, he would cut me off along the way and simply kill me while telling the world that I have left for the borderlands. As a result, we have to wait for the best window period, which is the day when Yingzheng is away in Yongdu for his coronation. And to further safeguard ourselves, we must attack Lu Buwei proactively; otherwise, we will die without a burial place."

Xiao Yuetan nodded in agreement: "Shaolong's thinking has covered all the angles."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "My thinking powers are inferior to Elder Brother's. I can outshine you presently because nobody understands Yingzheng's capabilities and callousness better than me. If we are not careful, we will all perish like a sinking ship on the open sea."

Xiao Yuetan wondered: "How do you plan to deal with Lu Buwei?"

Xiang Shaolong officially state: "I was about to seek guidance from Mister."

Supporting his bearded chin with one hand, Xiao Yuetan grinned: "Master Tu should be the correct person to consult. Besides him, no one has a clearer

picture of Lu Buwei's actual strength and schemes. He has been patiently serving him for so many years in anticipation for this day to arrive."

Xiang Shaolong was elated: "In this case, I shall depend on the two of you to come up with the appropriate plans and strategies. The rest of us shall await your orders like soldiers."

Raising his head to gawk at the enchanting night sky, Xiang Shaolong fantasied: With Tu Xian's years of experience and Xiao Yuetan's wisdom, he would soon be able to view the same night sky from the borderlands.

The next morning, even before the sun has appeared, the warriors of Wu Residence are already up and assembled in the garden, practicing their martial arts. Xiang Shaolong himself is patiently guiding Wu Guo in using a replica Hundred Battle Sabre that Uncle Qing has specially forged.

Although the chromium used in this sabre is not as good as the original, the sabre is already one of the best weapons that Uncle Qing has forged.

Being a martial arts exponent himself, regardless of bearing or aura, Wu Guo is able to fashion himself after Xiang Shaolong.

Using the Mozi Sword, Teng Yi engaged him in a duel. After more than a hundred moves later, Wu Guo exhibited signs of losing.

Wu Yan Zhe, Wu Shu, Jing Shan and the Guardians clapped and cheered for him.

Beckoning Wu Yan Zhe to his side, Xiang Shaolong advised: “Among the Guardians, you are the wisest and most steadfast. During the trip to Yongdu with Wu Guo, you must remember that safeguarding your lives is the top priority. Whenever the circumstances become unfavourable, use the grappling hooks and escape back here.”

Wu Yan Zhe acknowledged: “Master Xiang, you can put your mind at ease. Two years ago, Master Tao has already stationed some men at Yongdu. Not only can we gain a good understanding of the situation, certain preparations have been put in place. In cases of emergency, they can offer shelter to us.”

Standing beside them, Ji Yanran comforted: “This fellow Wu Guo is full of devious ideas. During any confrontations, he is always the one who walks away with the better deal. Ambushing him is easier said than done. Shaolong, you can put your mind at ease.”

Xiang Shaolong has full conviction in Wu Guo’s abilities; otherwise he would not have allowed him to take this risk. He specifically reminded Wu Yan Zhe who is now opposite him: “Crown Prince would wait for the best opportunity before launching a secret assault on me. That would be the time when he and Lao Ai are clashing head on. Otherwise, he would not be able to frame Lao Ai for my death.”

Ji Yanran interrupted: “If there is a way to secure the mask on a corpse with the same body build as Hubby, we may be able to temporarily deceive Crown Prince.”

His eyes lighting up, Wu Yan Zhe was thrilled: “Let’s see what happens! I am

certain it can be arranged.”

At this juncture, a breathless Wu Guo came up to the three of them. With a proud air, he smirked: “How is my Hundred Battle Sabre Play?”

Ji Yanran giggled: “Look at you. Does your Master Xiang pant and gasp for air after a fight?”

Wu Guo cheekily laughed: “Don’t forget that I have not fully recovered from my sickness. Some wheezing is considered normal.”

Ji Yanran nodded: “You are good. I nearly forgot about that point.”

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, she recommended: “Hubby had better look for Mister Xiao and get him to put some make up for you, giving you a sickly appearance. When Crown Prince sees your face, it would be easier for you to fake your illness later on.”

Wu Guo added: “At the beginning, you should act tired. As time passes, you can gradually increase the signs of illness. That would be a perfect cover.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: This is called two heads are better than one. When he was about to speak out, he saw Tao Fang leading a man and walking briskly towards them. As the crowd looks towards him in astonishment, everyone erupted with delight.

The man turned out to be the long-absent Wang Jian, Qin’s indomitable and legendary general.

Chapter 05

Reunion After A Long Split

Compared to the past, Wang Jian is more tanned and muscular-looking. As a matter of fact, he has transformed into someone with a powerful and masterful aura. The most striking were his sharp and electrifying eyes, radiating an impressive sensation despite his calm demeanour, truly befitting the characteristic of this celebrated general.

With a sincere smile hanging on his face, Wang Jian gave Xiang Shaolong a bear hug before releasing a long sigh: “Does Third Brother know how much Little Brother has yearned for all of you?”

Teng Yi and Jing Jun leapt into their arms. As the four sworn brothers shared a group hug, it was such a touching and tear-jerking scene.

Wang Jian happily laughed and hugged Teng Yi and Jing Jun individually as a form of love. He observed: “Shaolong has lost some weight but you are much more awe-inspiring compared to the time when I left Xianyang.”

Turning to Ji Yanran, he smiled: “Third Sister in Law is much prettier too.”

The rest of the men started to swarm over, taking turns to shake hands and salute this renowned general.

Xiang Shaolong wondered: “When did Fourth Brother come back? Have you

seen Crown Prince?”

Wang Jian mused: “Judging by my ordinary attire, you should have guessed that I came back secretly. Somehow, I felt that it is better for me to visit you guys first before paying my respects to Crown Prince.”

As everyone was stunned at his words, Ji Yanran probed: “Why would Fourth Brother in Law possess such a mindset?”

In a deep voice, Wang Jian divulged: “To be honest, I had arrived three days ago but chose to endure the inconveniences and stayed in a secret place outside the city. In the meantime, I sent my men into the city to seek out information as I am concerned that Lu Buwei and Lao Ai had summoned me back by using a fake decree. Beyond my anticipation, I got wind of some alternative news. It seems like Third Brother and Crown Prince are not on good terms.”

Teng Yi questioned: “What updates did Fourth Brother receive?”

Wang Jian revealed: “Firstly, Crown Prince appears to have given permission for Third Brother and your clan to leave for the borderlands and secondly, Crown Prince and Third Brother are not as close as before. Unlike the past, Crown Prince no longer discuss his private affairs with Third Brother.”

Jing Jun sighed: “Fourth Brother’s spies are really proficient.”

Making up his mind, Xiang Shaolong invited: “Let’s enter the hall before we discuss any further!”

Sitting themselves in the inner hall, Wang Jian coldly grunted: “This time round, I have brought thirty thousand crack troops back with me. They are the best of the best and every single one of them is willing to die for me, Wang Jian. Fighting against these mere rebels? I only need to point my finger and I guarantee their absolute destruction.”

He then sighed with a breath of air: “However, I am worried about Crown Prince and the possibility of him trying to harm Third Brother. As Crown Prince matures with age, he has become more and more formidable.”

Everyone can easily deduce that Wang Jian must have received news about Yingzheng’s questionable heritage and is therefore making this assumption. To prevent Xiang Shaolong from being awkward and also as a sign of trust in Xiang Shaolong, he did not directly confront him.

The news of Yingzheng beheading Qian Zhi has taken the entire State by the storm. There is no reason for Wang Jian to be ignorant about it.

The ten eyes of Tao Fang, Ji Yanran, Jing Jun, Teng Yi and Wu Guo are all focused on Xiang Shaolong, letting him decide his explanation to Wang Jian.

Xiang Shaolong broke out into a wide smile: “Fourth Brother is truly worthy of the title: Qin’s Top General. You had barely came back and your intelligence of Xianyang is so comprehensive.”

He is indirectly affirming Wang Jian’s presumptions.

His eyes shimmering with brilliance, Wang Jian professed: “My enemies are

the dim-witted Xiongnu while Third Brother is contending against the allied forces of the five eastern States. Since when did I, Wang Jian, become the top general?"

Pausing, Wang Jian went straight to the point: "Whatever Third Brother wants me, Fourth Brother to do, I will do exactly as per your instructions. You can speak without any reservations."

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing. Stretching his hands and grabbing Wang Jian's broad shoulders, he cheerfully exclaimed: "I want Fourth Brother to cleanse our State, wiping out all traces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. And assist Yingzheng in uniting the lands and build the Great Empire of Qin. In the process, Fourth Brother shall become the most illustrious general in the records of history."

At this point in time, Qin has two Great Generals and they are Xiang Shaolong and Wang Jian. From the perspective of the Court of Qin, both men enjoy the highest respect and accolades internally and externally. Within the military, their standing is even more prominent.

If the two of them choose to work together, they will definitely pose a viable threat to Yingzheng.

However, Xiang Shaolong chose to simply reject Wang Jian's suggestion and thereby preventing a Qin's internal strife.

Of course the others do not know that Xiang Shaolong had already understood this fact from history: Nobody can hope to overcome Qin

Shihuang. As a result, he dared not even harbour any thoughts of staging his own rebellion.

Unconsciously, he won Wang Jian's praises of admiration but Xiang Shaolong modestly expressed: "Fourth Brother is giving me too much credit. There are many areas that I would have to rely on you."

In a solemn tone, Wang Jian described: "In the history of our Great Qin, Crown Prince can be considered our wisest and most scheming ruler, while Li Si's capabilities is not inferior to Shang Yang. But if we are talking about meeting on the battlefield, I, Wang Jian, fear nobody except Third Brother and Li Mu. In terms of scheming, you can never be safe against underhand methods. What are Third Brother's plans?"

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Is Fourth Brother aware of Crown Prince's military deployment?"

Wang Jian unabashedly shared: "The main strength of Crown Prince lies mainly in the Imperial Palace Guards and the Imperial Cavalry. Lately, the Palace Guards have been actively recruiting personnel and their strength has been boosted to fifty thousand. Regardless of training, equipment and remuneration, they are far better off compared to the other forces. In addition, they are fiercely loyal towards Crown Prince. They are the ones Third Brother have to guard against."

Xiang Shaolong recalled that day when Lord Changwen chased up to him from the palace and advised himself to give up his plans to leave for the borderlands. Unfortunately, he was rejected unreservedly by Xiang Shaolong.

After all, Lord Changping and Lord Changwen are members of the royal family. Blood is thicker than water. In case of a dispute, they would definitely side with Xiao Pan.

Wang Jian added: “Against these rebels, Crown Prince should have logically summoned Huan Qi back. Instead, he summoned An Guxi all the way back from the Qin-Chu Border. Based on this point alone, I am certain that he has the intention to confront Third Brother.”

Teng Yi was thunderstruck: “An Guxi is back? Why are we kept in the dark?”

In a deep voice, Wang Jian established: “This is Crown Prince’s secret attack force. However, I have yet to determine the size of his army. I only know that he has left the border and is camped somewhere between Xianyang and Yongdu. Upon receiving the royal decree, he can reach Xianyang or Yongdu within a day.”

Like Lord Changping and Lord Changwen, An Guxi is a member of the royal family and would definitely support Yingzheng in times of trouble. No wonder Wang Jian could speculate that Yingzheng is having unfavourable thoughts about Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong solemnly swore: “I don’t give a hoot about his deployments. As long as Fourth Brother can secure the fake Xiang Shaolong’s departure from Yongdu, we have the ability to handle the rest.”

Wu Guo smiled: “It is true that we have to depend on Master Jian to take good care of my measly little life.”

As Wang Jian stared at Wu Guo with a flabbergasted expression, Ji Yanran swiftly explained their ruse in her melodious voice.

Wang Jian bitterly laughed: “If your ruse is exposed, Third Brother would be found guilty of deceiving the King!”

Teng Yi grudgingly smiled: “This is a risk we have to undertake. If Fourth Brother has seen Wu Guo in action, you too, would feel confident that we can pull this through.”

Ji Yanran giggled: “Additionally, your Third Brother will be faking an illness, making it easier to proceed with the impersonation.”

Wang Jian suggested: “If the switch can be made halfway through the journey, it would be perfect!”

Xiang Shaolong was elated: “With Fourth Brother supporting at the side, it has increased our conviction drastically. Meanwhile, it is not convenient for Fourth Brother to stay for too long.”

After finalizing their future secret communication methods, Wang Jian furtively slipped away.

Xiang Shaolong left in search for Xiao Yuetan and found him sitting in front of a bronze mirror and disguising himself as an old man. He promptly updated him about Wang Jian’s collaboration.

Xiao Yuetan nodded: “Judging from his bearing and appearance, it is

unmistakably clear that this man places heavy emphasis on brotherhood and is not someone who will cower to the rich and powerful. With him secretly providing assistance, the odds of our success have increased by several folds.”

Turning puzzled, he quizzed: “Don’t you need to attend morning court?”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “That is why I am looking for you. I have to trouble Elder Brother to apply some make-up for me and give me a sickly appearance.”

With an amused expression, Xiao Yuetan scoffed: “Shaolong has underestimated Yingzheng. If he learns about your sickness, he would surely send a royal physician to treat your disease and concurrently investigate the truth about your illness claims. Shaolong’s fraud would be exposed by just a simple diagnosis.”

Xiang Shaolong was horrified: “What should I do?!”

Glancing at the sky, Xiao Yuetan calculated: “Fortunately, there is still time, because Yingzheng can only send for the royal physician after the morning court session. I shall leave at once and gather some herbs for you. After consumption, these herbs will trigger your pulse to become unstable without any side effects. We can then deceive Yingzheng and prevent him from growing suspicious towards you.”

With regards to Xiao Yuetan’s knowledge and skills, Xiang Shaolong has nothing but respect and admiration. He was secretly gratified that Lu Buwei

has tried to harm Xiao Yuetan, forcing him to switch sides. Otherwise, Xiao Yuetan would probably become his most feared enemy right now.

That very afternoon, as Xiao Yuetan had forecasted, Xiao Pan sent two Imperial Physicians to attend to Xiang Shaolong's medical condition. Even Lord Changping was also here to see him.

After the two doctors felt his pulse, both unequivocally diagnosed that Xiang Shaolong's has over-exerted his physical body and has therefore caught the flu bug.

Inspired, Xiang Shaolong gingerly lead them on, causing them to believe without a doubt that root of his sickness was due to long exposure to snowy wilderness during his fugitive days.

Once the Imperial Physicians retreated out of the room, Lord Changping sat down on his beside. With a heavy expression, he sighed with a breath, appearing to be in a dilemma over what he wants to say to Xiang Shaolong.

Putting on a feeble act, Xiang Shaolong muttered: "What is troubling Your Lordship?"

Lord Changping sighed: "Aye! My mind is in a quandary. On one hand, I wish Shaolong can remain sick and bedridden but on the other hand, I wanted Shaolong to recover in due time. Aye!"

Xiang Shaolong can feel the warmth in his heart. Strongly gripping Lord Changping's hand, he whispered: "I understand everything. Your Lordship

need not speak any further.”

An agitated Lord Changping stammered: “You... ..”

Revealing a bittersweet smile on his face, Xiang Shaolong pondered in a deep voice: “Serving a king is like walking with tigers; this is an age old truth. Let’s not talk these things anymore. Is Ying Ying happy? How is Duanhe treating her?”

His eye sockets filled with hot tears, Lord Changping decisively declared: “Our prosperity and attainment today is all thanks to Shaolong’s endorsement and patronage. If we, the two brothers, can sit by and do nothing while Shaolong is in trouble, can we be considered humans? Crown Prince is obviously the one at fault.”

Xiang Shaolong is touched. He gently advised: “Regarding these matters, there is no right and wrong. Please do not bear any grudges towards Crown Prince. Little Brother has a way to preserve my life.”

Wiping his tears with his sleeve, Lord Changping divulged after a short contemplation: “Shaolong must guard against this man named Wei Liao. He hails from Daliang, Capital of Wei. After arriving in Qin, he has become a resident advisor under Crown Prince and is highly regarded by him. In fact, there are several matters that Crown Prince would consult him instead of us. This man is extremely shrewd and talented in military maneuvers. He authored the military manuscript ‘Wei Liao Strategies’, driving the main concept: Attack small to grow big; one to rule them all, which largely coincides with our Great Qin’s ambition to unite the States. Crown Prince is

probably influenced by him and is pushing the agenda for conquering the other States. Whoever that opposes his grand plan of uniting the lands are mercilessly beheaded.”

Xiang Shaolong understood his predicament.

Lord Changping is hinting him that Xiao Pan is going all out to get rid of him in order to preserve his kingly authority and wishes for him to remain sick in bed. Indirectly, he is insinuating that if Xiang Shaolong were to accompany Xiao Pan to Yongdu, certain death awaits him.

Noting that this Wei Liao is not holding an official post, Xiang Shaolong is convinced that he has been specially selected by Xiao Pan to deal with himself. This is because the talented officials under Xiao Pan are all hardcore buddies of Xiang Shaolong. To get rid of himself, Xiao Pan has to engage an ‘outsider’.

Lord Changping added: “Did Shaolong notice that Li Si has changed a lot? We no longer adore him like before; he is too desperate for power and authority.”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling moved again, recognizing Lord Changping’s intention to warn him about Li Si. Nonetheless, only he can truly comprehend Li Si’s situation. In reality, Li Si is even more passionate about pursuing the dream of conquering all the States and uniting all the territories; it is his ultimate goal in life. As a result, he was forced to do whatever he can to please Xiao Pan. Li Si, after all, did risk his own life to advise Xiang Shaolong to flee for his life, clearly demonstrating the genuine friendship that exists in

his heart.

Patting Lord Changping's hand, Xiang Shaolong grinned: "Go back and make your report to Crown Prince! Tell him I will definitely accompany him to Yongdu."

As Lord Changping is still reeling from shock, Xiang Shaolong winked at him several times. Although he does not have a clue about his plans, Lord Changping got the message after identifying Xiang Shaolong's look of confidence and left him as it is.

For the next three days, Xiao Pan continued to send Imperial Physicians to attend to him.

By now, it is only ten days until the trip to Yongdu. Xiang Shaolong pretended to recover slightly and entered the palace to seek an audience with Xiao Pan with lesser 'sickly' make up.

After being informed of his arrival, Xiao Pan personally received him at the palace entrance, putting up a good show of respect.

Concluding a round of pleasantries, Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong adjourned to the Imperial Study to begin their secret meeting.

This future Qin Shihuang heaved with a sigh of relief: "It is a blessing that Great General is able to recover in time. Otherwise, without Great General beside Guaren providing pointers, stratagems and countering the rebels, it would be disastrous."

Xiang Shaolong carefully scrutinized this King of Qin whom he had personally raised. Momentarily, his heart is overwhelmed with countless emotions clashing with one another and he could no longer differentiate between love and hate. As instructed by Xiao Yuetan, he queried in a hoarse voice: "Is everything ready?"

Xiao Pan nodded: "We are all set. Wang Jian is back and he had brought along an army of thirty thousand crack troops, every one of them a brave and experienced war veteran. Guaren has assigned him to a location near Yongdu as per our deployments."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "What are your plans?"

With a tinge of awkwardness, Xiao Pan articulated: "According to Mao Jiao's spy reports, Lao Ai is planning to activate his forces and begin the rebellion on the night of the coronation when everyone is drunk and asleep from all the celebrations. When that happens, Wang Jian will besiege Yongdu with his men, trapping Lao Ai and his accomplices."

Xiang Shaolong deliberately put on an air of displeasure: "Since Wang Jian is back, why didn't he come to visit me?"

Xiao Pan hurriedly explained: "It is Guaren who had prohibited him from entering the City. Great General must not misjudge him."

Xiang Shaolong interrogated: "Any news from Lu Buwei's camp?"

His royal eyes turning icy, Xiao Pan frostily hissed: "In the meantime, what

can he amount to? However, it will be a different story when Guaren lead my civil and military officials to Yongdu.”

Seemingly afraid of meeting Xiang Shaolong’s gaze, Xiao Pan lowered his head and continued in a deep voice: “After the departure of Guaren and Great General, Advisor Wei Liao will remain behind in Xianyang and assume command of the City. To deal with Lu Buwei, he shall be bestowed with Guaren’s Tiger Seal and he has complete autonomy to deploy the three armies of Xianyang. Guaren shall announce this tomorrow morning during the Court session.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his anger mounting. Despite his nice sounding words, Xiao Pan is actually relieving Teng Yi and Jing Jun of their military command.

At the end of the day, the Qin military is fiercely loyal to the royal family. If Teng Yi and Jing Jun are unable to deploy the Imperial Cavalry, Xiang Shaolong would be handicapped in the showdown between him and Lu Buwei.

To make it worse, Wei Liao would have complete jurisdiction over any killings.

Xiang Shaolong shook his head, disagreeing: “This arrangement is illogical. Presently, the Imperial Infantry is controlled by the two camps of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai. Wei Liao is a fresh face and lack battle accomplishments. Not only would he be unable to win the respect of the soldiers, it would dampen the morale of the Imperial Cavalry. This proposal is impractical. Would Crown Prince please reconsider?”

Xiao Pan still retains some fear of Xiang Shaolong and on top of that, he has a guilty conscience. After a short contemplation, he clarified: “Essentially, Guaren’s strategy is strictly aimed at Lu Buwei. If he tries to manipulate the deployments of the Imperial Cavalry, we can charge him with treason. With reason on our side, Wei Liao can simply exterminate him and his followers. Hey! Of course we would require the collaboration of the two generals Teng Yi and Jing Jun.”

Though Xiang Shaolong’s deep-set eyes are flickering with a chilling sensation, he plainly concluded in a calm tone: “You can simply promote Wei Liao to become the Imperial Infantry Commander!”

Xiao Pan was perplexed: “But this is a pointblank offensive against Lu Buwei; that Traitor would never give his consent.”

Xiang Shaolong stated with indifference: “In this case, Crown Prince can simply hand your Tiger Seal to Teng Yi. Once the coronation hour has passed, Crown Prince shall become the King of Qin. Without Empress’s approval, Crown Prince can control the armies of Xianyang at will. Isn’t it better than causing unnecessary alarm?”

He is convinced that Xiao Pan needed to coax himself to Yongdu and would not clash with him at this point in time. Since Xiao Pan is evidently inferior in terms of courage, Xiang Shaolong used this golden opportunity to ask for the sky and watch how Xiao Pan would respond.

In reality, Xiao Pan cannot be bothered with the Imperial Infantry and had wanted to regain control of the Imperial Cavalry. But of course he could not

say it outright.

After a lengthy pause, Xiao Pan finally relented: “Since you say so, I shall stick to the original military appointments. Wei Liao will encamp outside Xianyang City with his forces and whenever necessary, he shall supplement the two generals Teng Yi and Jing Jun.”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly humoured. Even if Wei Liao has three heads and six arms, he would not know that Xiang Shaolong is the real mastermind behind Xianyang’s deployments and is bound to be at a disadvantage.

No longer interested in idle chatter with Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong used his lingering sickness as an excuse to return home.

Chapter 06

Thick Clouds Of War

Back at Wu Residence, Xiang Shaolong learnt that Qin Qing is here and found her with Ji Yanran in the hall, whispering secretively to each other. Both ladies wore a heavy expression on their faces and forcefully mustered a smile at the sight of him.

A bewildered Xiang Shaolong sat and questioned: "Why are the two of you in a state of anxiety?"

Ji Yanran explained: "Crown Prince has officially decreed Sister Qing to accompany him to Yongdu in order to assist him with the coronation procedures. Sister Qing is feeling distressed over this. She cannot afford to disobey the decree and yet, it is not ideal for her to go to Yongdu."

Xiang Shaolong violently trembled: "No one knows me better than Yingzheng. He has hit me at my Achilles Heel."

With a frantic expression, Qin Qing dismissed in a melancholic tone: "Just leave without me. I don't think he has the guts to vent his frustration on me. After the dust has settled, I will look for you people at the borderlands!"

Recomposing himself, Xiang Shaolong shook his head decisively and declared: "No! If we are leaving, we will leave together. Otherwise, the heart wrenching pain of pining for each other will torture me to no ends."

Listening to Xiang Shaolong's emotional outburst, Qin Qing is so touched her lovely eyes begin to turn red.

Ji Yanran suggested: "Yanran can disguise myself as Sister Qing's personal maid and can react to any unforeseen circumstances."

Briefly dazed, Xiang Shaolong agreed: "That's a good plan and the enemy would not anticipate it. If necessary, I can get Jing Jun to personally fetch both of you at Yongdu. In terms of ninja climbing skills, who can hold a candle to him?"

Qin Qing wondered: "I would like to learn about Hubby Xiang's ninja climbing skills. Are you willing to teach me?"

Hearing her words, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran stared at each other with a flabbergasted countenance. Qin Qing is such a civilized, prim and proper beauty. If she were to pick up the climbing skills of the Wu Family Special Forces, how would she eventually turn out?

That night, Xiao Yuetan leisurely strolled back.

Everyone quickly gathered in the secret room for a discussion.

Xiao Yuetan started: "If not for Master Tu keeping Traitor Lu under secret surveillance, as we walk down the path of reincarnation, we would remain as muddle-headed ghosts."

Everyone flinched and swiftly pressed him for details.

Xiao Yuetan clarified: “Lu Buwei is now facing a shortage of reliable talents and had no choice but to assign heavy responsibilities to his pioneering family warriors which Master Tu headed. Hence, Master Tu is able to comprehend the finer details of Traitor Lu’s schemes.”

Ji Yanran exposed: “Of late, Lu Buwei has kept a low profile and appeared to be vulnerable and in a state of decline. So it is just an act.”

Jing Jun antagonistically cursed: “This time round, we must tear him to shreds.”

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: “We have neglected Lu Buwei’s last trick in the bag: His allies from the Six Eastern States. Among the Kings of the six States, each and every one of them views Yingzheng as a savage beast that will devour everything in its path. In order to topple Yingzheng, they are willing to pay any price. In their opinion, if Lao Ai can end up as the King of Qin, it would be even better.”

Xiang Shaolong’s face turned pale: “Would he have the audacity to open up the passes and simply allow the allied army to pass through?”

Xiao Yuetan chortled: “Even if he possesses the guts to do so, it would be futile. The soldiers of Qin love their country and would not carry out the order. In addition, the Three States, Chu and Yan are severely handicapped by Shaolong’s assault. Even if we open up the passes, their armies would not have the conviction to proceed with the invasion. Nevertheless, the six States has dispatched four teams of kamikaze desperados, each of them a highly skilled fighter who is able to fight off a hundred men. At an opportune

moment, they will execute their well-planned assassination attempt. Their four targets are Yingzheng, Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping and Li Si.”

Of course Yingzheng and Xiang Shaolong would be among the chosen targets.

Lord Changping and Li Si are the top military and civil officials of Yingzheng. If they are out of the picture, the hundreds of civil and military officials would be leaderless, giving Lu Buwei a chance to take charge.

Xiang Shaolong thought: The person they should really try to assassinate is Wang Jian. However, Lu Buwei is probably still in the dark about Wang Jian’s return.

Presently, the State of Qin is undergoing a critical period in its evolution. The minute Xiao Pan ascends the throne; the two camps of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai will perish without a burial place.

Tao Fang enquired in a deep voice: “Are these men in Xianyang?”

Xiao Yuetan answered: “To conceal their presence, they are holing up in the nearby mountain caves and forests while their food rations are provided by Master Tu. Ladies and Gentlemen, you should realize what a favourable arrangement this is.”

Ji Yanran inquired: “Is Manager Tu aware of their plans and details?”

Xiao Yuetan disclosed: “With regards to this, Imperial Infantry Commander Xu Shang is the one with all the information. As long as we can capture him

alive, I would be able to force a confession out of him.”

Teng Yi professed: “If Xu Shang steps out of the City, we would be able to capture him alive for Mister’s interrogation. But if he stations himself within the Command Centre, we are powerless unless we chose to attack him head on.”

Xu Shang himself is a master swordsman and is a resident of Imperial Uncle Residence. Wherever he goes, he would be escorted by a sizable entourage of bodyguards. Within the Command Centre, it is a concentration of his men and influence. Killing him might be workable but capturing him alive is going to be an incredible feat.

From his bosom, Xiao Yuetan produced a roll of parchment. Spreading it across the table, he narrated: “This is a complete blueprint of Imperial Uncle Residence, including all the defensive traps and hidden rooms. If we employ certain strategies instead of brute force, it is quite possible for us to assassinate Lu Buwei and kidnap Xu Shang.”

Pausing, he added: “Master Tu has prepared a powerful anesthetic; if we put it in the drinking wells of Imperial Uncle Residence, its consumers can forget about waking up within three days.”

Jing Jun cheered: “That’s brilliant!”

Xiang Shaolong probed: “Since Senior Tu did participate in Lu Buwei’s confidential meetings, did he manage to learn about his complete scheme?”

Xiao Yuetan icily grinned: “Even if Master Tu did not participate in the meetings, Traitor Lu cannot pull the wool over his eyes. Traitor Lu’s plan is to unleash two simultaneous attacks. When Lao Ai is staging his rebellion at Yongdu, he would launch his own uprising at Xianyang and kill everyone who opposes him.”

Pausing, he continued: “It is imperative to successfully assassinate Yingzheng. With Yingzheng dead, Lu Buwei can use the excuse of attacking Lao Ai and obtain full military control of Qin.

Tao Fang frowned: “If Lao Ai failed in his rebellion, wouldn’t Traitor Lu’s beautiful dream end up in smoke? And he would be labeled as a stinking insurgent.”

Xiao Yuetan enlightened: “That’s why Traitor Lu has instructed Guan Zhongxie to proceed to Yongdu to meet up with the experts from the six States and oversee their assassination maneuvers. Based on his remarkable archery skills, he has a decent shot at success. At the end of the day, Yingzheng is not familiar with layout of Yongdu.”

Everybody is in a state of agitation. If they do not act first and get rid of this man, he would become a most fearful threat.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “We did suspect this move from Lu Buwei; unfortunately, it turned out to be true. Is there any way to pinpoint Guan Zhongxie’s location?”

Xiao Yuetan shook his head: “This is the Old Thief’s last and most powerful

weapon. Except for himself, nobody else knows about Guan Zhongxie's movement. The success or failure of Traitor Lu is resting on the deciding death of Yingzheng, and he does have a fair chance of victory."

Ji Yanran pointed out: "Wouldn't Wu Guo be in an extremely dangerous position?"

Wu Guo's face is completely drained of blood. However, no one will blame him for being frightened after taking into account Guan Zhongxie's supreme archery skills.

Stroking his beard, Xiao Yuetan guffawed: "Dear all, this is called thinking too much. Actually, Guan Zhongxie is not absolutely untraceable. After all, his first target has to be Yingzheng. An alternative is assaulting the four targets simultaneously in order not to raise the alarm and lose the element of surprise."

Wu Guo instantly heaved a sigh of relief.

Ji Yanran deduced: "In this sense, the assassination attempts should be concentrated in Yongdu. Only in this instance can they frame Lao Ai for the murders."

She went on with a smile: "Those well versed in warfare will overcome their enemies by strategy instead of numbers. The biggest weakness of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's collaboration is their mutual distrust and mutual scheming. According to Yanran's estimate, it is likely that Lu Buwei did not reveal to Lao Ai about his assassination plans and has planted spies among the followers of

Crown Prince. If we manage to leak the assassination plans to Lao Ai, we may gain some unexpected benefits.”

Xiang Shaolong is not the least worried about Xiao Pan’s royal life; otherwise, history would not have records of this person known as Qin Shihuang. In the same context, he is not worried about Lord Changping and Li Si too.

At this point, Teng Yi commented: “The best way is to kill Guan Zhongxie beforehand and indirectly safeguard ourselves. If anything were to happen to me and Little Jun, Traitor Lu can simply seize control of the Imperial Cavalry.”

Guan Zhongxie is gifted warrior and an astute strategist. With him masterminding the assassins from the six States, who would dare to be complacent.

Xiao Yuetan suddenly proposed: “With Wu Guo disguised as Shaolong, Shaolong can concurrently impersonate Wu Guo. That would be a perfect scenario.”

Everyone was full of praise and cheers.

Tao Fang wondered: “Is there enough time?”

Xiao Yuetan happily laughed: “When I was making the first mask, I already thought of this and made both masks instead. That’s why I ended up taking so much time!”

Everyone took turns in commending Xiao Yuetan for his brilliance and is full

of admiration for his wisdom and foresight.

Subsequently, they discussed the details of their deployments and decided that their utmost priority is to track down Guan Zhongxie. At the same time, they made special provisions in case of unforeseen circumstances.

That night, Xiang Shaolong had a very good rest and intentionally appeared during the morning court session, allowing Lu Buwei and the others to witness his sickly appearance and hear his hoarse voice.

The court session that morning was mainly centered on the affairs of the approaching coronation.

Lu Buwei actively persisted on staying behind and guarding Xianyang while Xiao Pan pretended to lose the debate and accepted his proposal with reluctance.

After the morning court session, the five men Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and Li Si adjourned to the Imperial Study for their private meeting.

Lord Changping and Li Si submitted their reports first and both their reports are concerning the Yongdu coronation process.

At the end of their submission, Xiao Pan narrated: "Officials (All of you) should know that this is the last opportunity for the two camps of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai to topple Guaren. In this aspect, what propositions would Officials recommend?"

Lord Changwen reported: “Your subordinate has made detailed preparations with regards to this matter. First of all, the ships sailing to Yongdu shall be similar looking and all of them will bear the royal flag, making it difficult for the enemy to pinpoint the actual ship that Guaren is sailing on. In addition, several mini battleships shall pave the way for us. Lastly, there will be elite soldiers lying in ambush in all the critical parts of the shore, guaranteeing a safe journey.”

Xiao Pan nodded his head and praised his work before reminding: “Nonetheless, the main danger would lie in Yongdu. For many years, Lao Ai has been making preparations just for this one day. We cannot afford to be complacent.”

Lord Changping added: “Guxi will first lead ten thousand elite soldiers into Yongdu and secure all the exits and entrances. Subordinate has confidence that Lao Ai would not dare to challenge him.”

Xiang Shaolong frowned: “When did Senior General An come back?”

Xiao Pan dryly coughed once and explained: “As Great General is at home and recuperating, Guaren dare not disturb and thus, did not tell Great General about his return.”

Li Si and the other two men lowered their head and kept their silence.

Xiang Shaolong furiously state: “Crown Prince is well-prepared and certainly do not require subordinate’s presence and advice. Why don’t subordinate remain in Xianyang and continue my recuperation?”

The heads of Li Si and the other two sank even lower.

Without any signs of fluster, Xiao Pan corrected: “Great General, you must not jump to conclusions. Guaren is now seeking your advice.”

Xiang Shaolong concluded: “If you do not make known to subordinate about your deployments and the available soldiers, be prepared to fail.”

Including Xiao Pan, the four men were taken aback.

Xiang Shaolong thought: This is called: I don’t usually speak, but when I do, you can expect some nerve-racking words. After receiving the precious intelligence reports from Tu Xian, he is much more confident in fighting this double war; the first war is against the gangs of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai; the second war is against the heartless fellow Xiao Pan.

With a serious demeanour, Xiao Pan questioned: “What does Great General mean?”

Of course Xiang Shaolong knew that Xiao Pan places a heavy emphasis on the meaning behind his words. Moreover, since he was young, Xiao Pan has always regarded himself as an infallible immortal. In addition, Xiang Shaolong has assisted Xiao Pan in resolving many of his difficulties and his standing in Xiao Pan’s heart is irreplaceable.

If it was somebody else, be it Wang Jian or Li Si, they would not have the same chilling effect on this future Qin Shihuang.

Instead of answering, Xiang Shaolong plainly interrogated: “How many men did Senior General An brought back from the Qin-Chu border?”

After some hesitation, Xiao Pan helplessly replied: “Fifty thousand.”

Scrutinizing the expression of the others, Xiang Shaolong is convinced that Xiao Pan did not lie to him about this matter. Without the slightest hint of surprise, he probed: “Where are the other forty thousand men stationed at? Who is in charge of them?”

Of course Xiang Shaolong is well aware that the huge army is not solely here to get rid of Lu Buwei; they would be used to attack Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the Wu Family Warriors as well but he intentionally forced Xiao Pan to confess so.

Xiao Pan appears to be afraid of facing Xiang Shaolong’s glare and pretended to flip through several documents on his table. With an air of nonchalance, he responded: “They are the reserve army which I prepared for cases of emergency. With Wei Liao at the helm, they can swiftly supplement the forces of Yongdu or Xianyang by taking the river route.”

Subsequently, he reminded with some impatience: “Great General has yet to answer Guaren’s question.”

Under the sky, only Xiang Shaolong would dare to speak with Xiao Pan in this manner.

Li Si and the others dare not interrupt.

Xiang Shaolong simply rationalized: “However brazen they can be, the gangs of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai would not throw eggs at stone by staging an open rebellion. Therefore, I am convinced that they will try to employ a secret assassination attempt. If they can successfully get rid of Crown Prince, chaos will descend and the traitors can reap benefits from the state of disorder. They will end up as the biggest winners.”

Lord Changping cannot help but interject: “We already thought of that and have implemented appropriate countermeasures.

Xiang Shaolong articulated in a deep voice: “Imagine a scenario whereby the head of the assassination team is Guan Zhongxie and the participants are top assassins from the other six States, each of them painstakingly chosen from thousands of candidates and has undergone vigorous training. On top of that, Crown Prince has to expose himself to the public during the coronation ceremony and there are also spies within the Palace Guards aiding the assassins. Is Your Lordship as surefooted as before?”

Including Xiao Pan, everyone’s countenance underwent a drastic change.

Years ago, on the way to Deshui for the Spring Sacrifice, Xiao Pan’s entourage was ambushed. Luckily, the decoy carriage was attacked but the memory of the incident is still fresh in their minds. With the deadly marksman Guan Zhongxie involved in the latest assault, who can guarantee that everything will be fine.

Lord Changping was thunderstruck: “According to the messengers, Guan Zhongxie is still in Han territory, locking horns with the people of Han.”

Xiang Shaolong dismissed: “That’s a sham. In this critical juncture, there is no reason for Lu Buwei to not summon his beloved son-in-law back. This is called: Feeding an army for days, unlocking their value in one battle.”

Xiang Shaolong’s words are highly persuasive and plausible; no one doubts his theory.

His royal eyes flickering, Xiao Pan glared at Xiang Shaolong and grilled: “Where did Great General get your information from?”

Xiang Shaolong has already anticipated this question from Xiao Pan and replied with a smile: “Lu Buwei has friends in the six States and so does subordinate.”

Xiao Pan stared blankly at him for a short spell and nodded: “What solutions do Great General advocate?”

Taking full advantage of his superior bargaining position, Xiang Shaolong demanded: “For a start, Crown Prince has to grant subordinate your Tiger Seal, giving subordinate the ability to deploy the military at will. Only then can subordinate find a remedy to this problem.”

This is Xiang Shaolong’s most astounding move and there is no basis for Xiao Pan to reject him. For the different ranks of commanders and generals, they are presented with a different Tiger Seal that reflects their rank and identity. In the same context, the Tiger Seal will limit the amount of soldiers they can bring into battle.

For those who are ranked Senior General and above, there is no limit on their army strength. Wherever they may be, they can recruit or deploy soldiers at will.

After every war and upon their return to Xianyang, the generals and commanders must surrender half of their Tiger Seal to the Court. The soldiers will be re-assigned back to their original barracks and the generals will be left with their personal soldiers. The personal soldiers of each general will vary based on their ranks. At the end of the day, the control of the military will reconsolidate in the hands of the King.

Being one of the two Great Generals of Qin, if Xiang Shaolong possess the complete Tiger Seal, he is as good as the Chief Commander. When that happens, except for Xiao Pan, no one can retract his authority.

As a result, with both halves of the Tiger Seal, Xiang Shaolong wields absolute authority over the soldiers of Qin. If Xiao Pan wishes to harm him, he cannot utilize Wei Liao who is a new and lowly ranked commander. The only possibility is for Xiao Pan to attack Xiang Shaolong in person.

This clearly demonstrates the importance of the Tiger Seal.

For three reasons, Xiang Shaolong is confident that Xiao Pan will acquiesce to his request.

Firstly, Xiao Pan is under the impression that Xiang Shaolong is always by his side. After arriving in Yongdu, Xiao Pan can easily demand the return of the Tiger Seal. It is not as if Xiang Shaolong is fighting a distant battle and can

choose to disobey Xiao Pan's decree.

Secondly, Xiang Shaolong had deliberately painted this scenario, forcing Xiao Pan to accede to his demands in order to placate and continue deceiving Xiang Shaolong.

Thirdly and best of all, Xiao Pan's trust in Xiang Shaolong's capabilities are deep-rooted. Furthermore, Xiao Pan fully believes that Xiang Shaolong would not bear to harm him.

As a result, Xiang Shaolong is not anxious about Xiao Pan's decision. Additionally, Xiao Pan cannot make enquiries about his plans, as it is tantamount to distrust.

As anticipated, Xiao Pan was briefly dazed before nodding his royal head in agreement: "As per Great General's request!"

Suppressing his overwhelming exhilaration, Xiang Shaolong plainly swore: "The day of Crown Prince's coronation shall be the day subordinate presents the head of Guan Zhongxie. If I fail in my duty, Crown Prince can punish me according to the military laws."

An extremely complicated look flashed past the eyes of Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself and took this opportunity to retreat.

Chapter 07

Unorthodox Interrogation

Lord Changwen chased up to Xiang Shaolong from the back. Riding side by side, their horses unhurriedly galloped along the road while the Guardians and Lord Changwen's bodyguards carefully scrutinized their surroundings for any signs of danger. Armed with human-sized shields and holding their bows, they kept a strict lookout for possible assassins. It was a tense atmosphere.

Xiang Shaolong casually checked: "Don't you need to attend to Crown Prince?"

Lord Changwen shook his head and probed: "What are Shaolong's plans against the rebels? Can you share some information with me? I may be able to lend you a hand."

With an air of indifference, Xiang Shaolong grilled: "Was it Crown Prince who ordered you to chase up to me and ask these questions?"

Revealing a stunned look, Lord Changwen is unable to answer him.

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "You can save it. I understand your difficulties."

His face darkening, Lord Changwen shamefully implored: "Can Shaolong help me out?"

Xiang Shaolong narrated: “You can report to Crown Prince that I have laid my hands on a bunch of clues, allowing me to take down Guan Zhongxie and the assassins of the six States in one fell swoop. Nevertheless, I would need to operate under full secrecy for my strategy to succeed. Therefore, with lesser people aware of my plans, the better it is for me.”

Lord Changwen hastily enquired: “What’s the purpose behind Shaolong’s request for the Tiger Seal?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought: Of course it is a life preservation tactic. Instead, he answered: “Because I would need to deploy thirty thousand Imperial Cavalry soldiers in my quest to exterminate these trespassing invaders.”

Pausing, he asked in return: “What is Wei Liao’s present rank?”

With a look of dilemma on his face, Lord Changwen lowered his head and responded: “I am not very sure.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Ultimately, Lord Changwen is inferior to his elder brother in terms of brotherhood loyalty. Sharing weal is easy; sharing woe is a different story.

Thinking about this, Xiang Shaolong cannot be bothered with his company.

With a “Please return!” Xiang Shaolong and the Guardians sped away. Back at his Command Centre, he immediately summoned the three men: Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Guo. After updating them about the Tiger Seal incident, he

asserted: “Presently, we are considered untouchable. Unless Yingzheng personally leads an army against me, nobody else can lay a finger on us.”

Teng Yi frowned: “However, Yingzheng can issue a decree to confiscate Third Brother’s military authority.”

Xiang Shaolong grinned: “That’s the best part. To make sure that I get rid of Guan Zhongxie, Yingzheng would not recall the Tiger Seal before the coronation. By the time he wishes to act against my interests, he would discover my absence at Yongdu. During that period, we could enjoy a few days of complete freedom and focus all our energies on countering Lu Buwei.”

Wu Guo nodded: “In this case, I must make my getaway before the end of the coronation ceremony.”

Jing Jun wondered: “Are we really going after Guan Zhongxie?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “Just take it that we are giving Yingzheng a huge farewell present before our departure!”

Teng Yi agreed: “We must do it; otherwise, if Traitor Lu happens to succeed in his scheme, we can forget about enjoying our days in peace.”

Xiang Shaolong proposed: “As long as we can capture all the members of one of the assassination teams that are concealed in the mountains or wilderness, and with Tu Xian concealing this development from Lu Buwei, we could execute our torturous interrogation methods and discover the location

of Guan Zhongxie.”

Wu Guo was puzzled: “I am still confused; instead of using the opportunity to head to Yongdu, why are the assassins still loitering near Xianyang.”

Jing Jun questioned: “Three days later, Yingzheng shall proceed to Yongdu. When does Third Brother plan to strike?”

Revealing a self-satisfying and self-confident smile, Xiang Shaolong simply decided: “Tonight! Let these men have a taste of our well-trained and seasoned Wu Family Special Forces.”

The three men stammered in shock: “Special Forces?”

Xiang Shaolong contentedly nodded.

Because of his 21st century scientific knowledge, Xiang Shaolong is able to recreate this ancient Special Forces team that employs the best battle techniques, allowing him to accomplish many missions that were originally insurmountable. Out of the blue, he can feel his chest swelling with infinite fighting spirit.

Under the brilliance of the bright moon, Xiang Shaolong who was disguised as Wu Guo is in a prone position with Ji Yanran beside him. They are waiting patiently on a cliff about six miles south of Xianyang City.

Armed with foldable crossbows, they are dressed in light jungle clothes. Underneath their clothes is a special armored vest, something similar to the

21st century bulletproof vest.

Now lying on the soft grass of the cliff, Xiang Shaolong reached out and patted the thigh of Ji Yanran who is sitting beside him. He softly remarked: "I hope Wu Guo don't screw up."

Tonight is the first time Wu Guo is entering the limelight with his Xiang Shaolong disguise. Accompanied by Teng Yi, they are meeting Xu Shang for a discussion, analyzing how the Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry can work hand in hand when Yingzheng is absent from Xianyang.

This tactic is to allay the suspicions of Xu Shang.

If Xu Shang learns that Xiang Shaolong has left the City, it will set off alarms in his head.

Lightly whining and brushing off Xiang Shaolong's invading hand, Ji Yanran frowned her brows: "Don't touch me. With your Wu Guo disguise, I forbid any intimacy."

Xiang Shaolong was humoured: "Outer beauty is deceptive; inner beauty is genuine. Even our Talented Lady doesn't realize this?"

Ji Yanran faintly sighed: "It is easier said than done. How many people can really forgo one's appearance? If a choice is available, who would choose ugliness over beauty."

At this juncture, Jing Jun crept towards both of them and whispered: "The

enemies numbered between twelve to fifteen men and they have set up camp in the forest. Their only defense is a sentry. I have casted sky-wide nets (chinese idiom 天罗地网), guaranteed to capture each and every one of them.”

This time round, it is truly a case of using sky-wide nets. The outstanding hunter, Jing Jun, has specially crafted dozens of large nets that can be placed on the ground or casted from the trees above.

These assassins who have sneaked into Qin are the elite warriors of the six States. Without a good strategy, killing them is easy but capturing them alive is going to be a challenge.

Jumping to his feet, Xiang Shaolong commanded: “Do it!”

Jing Jun sneaked away.

Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran ascended the summit of the hill and prostrated themselves among the thick grass, overlooking the huge stretch of thick forests that lie below them.

If not for Tu Xian’s accurate information, even with a massive army combing the area, it would be impossible to corner their targets like the present situation.

Out of a sudden, the sound of hoof beats can be heard about a mile away. It gradually became louder and louder, signaling its approach and is advancing towards the forest from far. Of course Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran are not

the least surprised, for it is part of their scheme to force the enemies to run in the opposite direction towards the ensnaring nets.

As anticipated, the enemies reacted instantaneously. By observing the stationary birds suddenly taking flight due to the commotion, Xiang Shaolong deduced that they are fleeing in the southeast direction where the nets are.

Continuous cries of astonishment and exclamation can be heard from the forest. Minutes later, the forest resumed its natural silence.

Exchanging a smile, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran knew that they had succeeded. Now, all they have to do is wait for Xiao Yuetan's interrogation methods.

Altogether, thirteen men were captured. Despite their varying appearances, all of them are tall and strapping characters. In an open skirmish, Xiang Shaolong and his men may suffer injuries or even death. But with their clever tactics against these unprepared criminals, no losses were reported and the entire operation was a piece of cake.

The apprehended men obviously had a pre-arrangement, with each person holding his tongue and radiating a strong determination as if death is nothing.

After smuggling them back to Wu Residence, Xiao Yuetan gave instructions to lock them up separately. Concluding a round of observation, he chose one of the assassins to be his interrogation target. To the crowd, he explained: "This man is rather handsome looking. I am sure his lifestyle is much more

enriching than the others and he would certainly enjoy the attention of many ladies. For a person like him to be willing to risk his life for this mission, I am positive he is doing it for the money and also to win the affections of a beauty. Needless to say, he is somebody who treasures his body and life.”

Ji Yanran complimented: “Mister is truly an expert in human psychology. No wonder you are Manager Tu’s most capable assistant.”

Xiao Yuetan chuckled: “I am just someone who uses my brain more often! It’s really nothing.”

He then pleaded in a low voice: “Can Yanran excuse yourself?”

Ji Yanran realizes that he is up to something that is unsuitable for a female spectator. Despite her unwillingness, she could only compliantly retreat from the room.

When the room is only left with the three men, namely Xiang Shaolong, Jing Jun and Xiao Yuetan, two Wu Family Warriors escorted the selected assassin in.

The lanky and fine-looking man is in the prime of his youth. Currently, his face is portraying a ghastly look and his body is exuding an air of despondency. With mud all over him, several parts of his clothes are torn and tattered. His hands are bounded behind him and his feet are locked together by an iron chain.

The three pairs of sharp eyes are scanning his face, keeping a lookout for any

changes in his facial expression.

Xiao Yuetan lightly snickered: “The person beside me is the earth-shattering figure Xiang Shaolong. Since Brother has the guts to come here, you should know what kind of person he is.”

The man peeped at Xiang Shaolong once. Initially exhibiting a strange look, he then slowly nodded his head.

In their hearts, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun are full of admiration for Xiao Yuetan’s choice of interrogation suspect. The other men would probably remain immobile. Since this person is willing to nod his head, there is a good chance of a confession.

Xiao Yuetan gently questioned: “How do I address Brother and where are you from?”

The face of the suspect revealed traces of an internal struggle and obvious signs of distress. Eventually, he vehemently shook his head once, indicating his refusal to speak.

Xiao Yuetan burst out laughing: “Let me show you something first. Afterwards, you can decide if you want to cooperate with us or not. Strip him.”

Receiving his order, the two warriors jumped into action. In the blink of an eye, the man is standing there in his birthday suit and his face is carrying a horrified expression.

At this moment, even the two men Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun cannot predict Xiao Yuetan's next move.

Xiao Yuetan gave another order and from outside the door, the sound of a trolley wheeling can be heard. There are also bizarre 'ji ji' noises, sending shivers down the spine of Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun.

Entering their sight was two Guardians pushing a huge, six feet by six feet iron cage. Inside the cage is about a hundred rats of all sizes, busily scampering around and making the 'ji ji' cries.

Jing Jun exclaimed: "Oh boy!"

On the other hand, Xiang Shaolong can literally feel all his hair standing on their ends and nearly wanted to excuse himself.

Blood fully drained from his face, the man's legs softened as he kneeled down on the floor. Simultaneously, his body started trembling all over as he visualized his looming torture.

Xiao Yuetan casually remarked: "Without my explanation, Brother should have guessed the purpose of these rats. I heard these rats are especially good at digging holes. Ha!"

With a wheezing sound, the suspect nearly fainted.

Lowering his head, the good-looking man asked in a quivering voice: "Are you telling the truth?"

Xiang Shaolong challenged in an unfriendly voice: "Have you ever heard of one incident when I failed to keep my word? Nonetheless, we must be able to prove that Brother is not lying to us before we will set you free."

The man submissively nodded: "I confess."

After obtaining precious information from the suspect, Wu Guo, Teng Yi and the other Guardians happened to return. In the highest of spirits, they must be feeling gratified at successfully deceiving Xu Shang.

Wu Yan Zhe commended: "Elder Brother Guo is brilliant indeed; whenever he gets stuck in the discussion, he would start coughing. With one hand supporting his head and a bitter expression, the resemblance is uncanny."

Having excused herself earlier, Ji Yanran stepped into the hall and frowned: "Make sure you do not overdo it."

Teng Yi assured: "You can set your mind at ease. Even I had to keep reminding myself that he is not Third Brother. Their only difference is the glow in their eyes. Fortunately, others will attribute it to Shaolong's lingering sickness and will not think much of it."

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, he inquired: "How is the interrogation?"

Xiang Shaolong cheerfully flashed the 'Victory' sign.

The Guardians and Wu Guo shouted and cheered in unison, nearly bringing the house down.

Jing Jun updated: “Luckily, we have Mister Xiao heading the interrogation, scaring that fellow into cooperating with us obediently. He even revealed details and answers that went beyond our questioning. It turns out that this is not some secret collaboration between the six States; it was Tian Dan masterminding the assassination all along. All the warriors are from Qi and some of them are impersonating as assassins from the other five States. Their leader is Bian Dongshan, Cao Qiudao’s top disciple and he reportedly has learnt the essence of Cao Qiudao’s skills. Lan Gongyuan was personally trained by him and he is currently residing at Yongdu.”

Xiao Yuetan supplemented: “This man is a master assassin. We cannot afford to be negligent.”

Teng Yi wondered: “I thought Guan Zhongxie’s Sect and Qixia Sword Sect are sworn enemies? Why would he collaborate with the disciple of Cao Qiudao?”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “Of course there is Lao Ai’s powerful henchman Han Jie who is linking and mediating between the two parties. This man is likely to be receiving bribes from Lu Buwei and has become Traitor Lu’s spy within the camp of Lao Ai.”

Ji Yanran probed: “Right now, what are Hubby’s plans regarding Guan Zhongxie?”

Remembering Lu Nianrong, Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. In a deep voice, he declared: “Given the present circumstances, where it is kill or be killed, I have to chop him down with Hundred Battle Sabre before he has the chance to pick up his giant steel bow.”

Xiao Yuetan quizzed: “When does Shaolong plan to strike?”

Xiang Shaolong seriously enquired: “Can we get our hands on two ordinary fishing boats? It must be secretly acquired.”

Tao Fang answered: “Leave this to me. When does Shaolong want the boats?”

Xiang Shaolong avowed: “Tomorrow! The earlier the better! I want to cut off the head on his neck before he receives any updates and present it to Yingzheng as our farewell gift.”

Everyone cheered in response and their morale was sky high.

Chapter 08

Surprise Attack

Early next morning, while disguised as Wu Guo, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun led fifty specially selected Wu Family Warriors in boarding the fishing vessels in a stealth manner. Against the current, they sailed towards Yongdu.

Because the Guardians have to escort Wu Guo, who is impersonating Xiang Shaolong and has to accompany Xiao Pan to Yongdu, they cannot participate in this mission.

Ji Yanran has to escort Qin Qing and cannot come along too.

Meanwhile, Teng Yi is responsible for leading the Imperial Cavalry in securing Xianyang and exterminating the other three teams of assassins.

With thick clouds covering the skies, it was drizzling non-stop.

Wearing their raincoats, the two men Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun are sitting at the bow of the vessel and discussing the details of their assault.

Xiang Shaolong professed: “We only have one full day and one full night to carry out our plan. If we cannot kill Guan Zhongxie within this time frame, there will not be a second chance.”

Brimming with conviction, Jing Jun suggested: “After sneaking into Yongdu,

we will immediately place Guan Zhongxie's hiding place under strict surveillance. When it gets dark, we shall move in and take his life."

Xiang Shaolong frowned: "However, I cannot decide if I should approach An Guxi for assistance. It may alert Lao Ai to our plans."

Jing Jun proposed: "Why don't we seek Fourth Brother's help instead!"

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "I do not want Yingzheng to learn about this. Moreover, it will affect Fourth Brother's career development."

Jing Jun exclaimed: "In this case, let's depend on ourselves. With careful planning, we can simply vanish after the deed. By then, Lao Ai would still be unaware that Guan Zhongxie is back and even perished in his territory of Yongdu."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "Nonetheless, Han Jie would quickly realize that something is amiss. To make things worse, this is Han Jie's territory. If we are planning to kill him as well, our risk will increase by several folds. That is why I am in a state of indecisiveness."

Jing Jun belittled: "So what if he knows! Would he dare to tell Lao Ai about it? Furthermore, if he wishes to send word to Lu Buwei, it can only happen two days later. Even so, his messenger may be intercepted by Second Brother."

According to their plans, when Xiao Pan leaves for Yongdu with his civil and military officials, Teng Yi's Imperial Cavalry will set up blockades on the river route and travelling roads between Yongdu and Xianyang, carrying out

checks on all the travellers going in and out of the city.

Xiang Shaolong agreed: “I guess that’s the best we can do.”

That same evening, Xiang Shaolong and his men discarded the two boats and climbed ashore about two miles away from Yongdu. Slipping past the river security checks, they approached Yongdu on foot.

Using falsified identification papers, they impersonated Qin citizens from other parts of the country. In different batches, they entered the City while posing as men from varying occupations.

Once they managed to contact the Wu Family Warriors whom Tao Fang had planted in Yongdu two years ago, Xiang Shaolong and his team concealed themselves in a common household near the south of the city. From there, they started their surveillance work.

Yongdu is Qin’s first capital city in the Guan Zhong district. Situated at the merging point of River Wei and River Zhi, it is a melting pot for the cultures of Guan Zhong, Ba Shu and Si Gen.

The location of Yongdu is strategic, with roads leading to Long Nan, Han Zhong, Ba Shu and many others.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the Duke of Qin selected Yongdu as his capital precisely because of this factor. On top of fortifying the area of Guan Zhong, he can set the stage for world domination.

In the future, Yingzheng's success in uniting the lands of Hua Xia is due to Yongdu and Guan Zhong's strategic and critical location.

Although the capital of Qin has relocated to Xianyang, the ancestral temple of the royal family is still based in Yongdu. For all grand ceremonies, they must be held in Yongdu's ancestral temple.

As the last line of defense for Xianyang, Yongdu plays an irreplaceable role since the founding of the State.

Yongdu is home to several majestic palaces. Among them, Dazheng Palace and Qinian Palace are the most magnificent.

Presently, Dazheng Palace has become the residence of Zhu Ji while Qinian Palace is designated to be Xiao Pan's temporary residence for his coronation trip.

Arriving at Yongdu, Xiang Shaolong is able to have a first hand experience of Lao Ai's grandeur.

The soldiers of Yongdu are dressed in military uniforms with a golden band around their collar, portraying an air of extravagance. Besides dressing differently from the usual simple-looking Qin soldier, the Yongdu guards are behaving in a brazen, condescending manner.

An Guxi's garrison has obviously failed to gain control over the entire city. For the time being, only the South Gate near River Wei, the road leading to Qinian Palace and Qinian Palace itself is under his jurisdiction.

With Zhu Ji backing Lao Ai and before their open confrontation, even Xiao Pan is powerless against this ‘fake father’.

Of course the situation will be totally reversed when the indomitable and master general Wang Jian enters the City. Regardless of their self-glorifying titles, Lao Ai’s thirty thousand rebels will be like cows being sent to the abattoir.

The only viable threat is Guan Zhongxie’s secret assassination team.

And Xiang Shaolong’s current mission is to move one step ahead of them, uprooting and annihilating them before they could carry out their plot.

Furthermore, he has to complete his mission without alerting Lao Ai. Otherwise, he would be collateral damage.

It is nearly 7pm and the sky is still drizzling when a report came in: Disguised as a commoner, a lone Guan Zhongxie has just left his hiding place.

Guan Zhongxie and Xiang Shaolong share a common drawback. Irrespective of their disguise, the observant would be able to identify them from their aura.

Xiang Shaolong decisively gave the order to begin their mission.

With Jing Jun and the fifty warriors, Xiang Shaolong disembarked at a quiet and lonely alley near the selected residence before removing their outer coats that is concealing their equipment and night suits.

The fifty warriors swiftly divided themselves into ten teams of five. Borrowing the cover of the walls and nightly shower, they snuck into the residence. The activities of the residence are limited to the occasional strongman travelling along the corridor. None of the faces are familiar to Xiang Shaolong or Jing Jun.

This particular residence is divided into five parts. In the centre, there is a sky well and sheltered walkways provide the link between them.

Once everyone is in battle position, Xiang Shaolong, Jing Jun and two teams of warriors cloaked themselves among the flower bushes beside the main hall.

The illumination of lanterns and human voices are transpiring from inside.

A warrior crept to the window and stole a peep before tiptoeing back and reporting: "There are five men inside the hall and two of them are armed. They are clustered on a mat at the east side of the hall, sitting rather close to the window."

Xiang Shaolong quizzed in a deep voice: "Are there any womenfolk?"

Another warrior who had peeped into the hall replied: "I noticed two female maids."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly troubled. Originally, he had wanted to kill every living soul within this dwelling. In this kill or be killed scenario, there is no room for compassion.

But how could he bear to kill these defenseless women?

He sighed with a breath: “Kill all the men. Capture all the women. We will deal with them afterwards. Tell everybody to wait for my signal.”

Four of the warriors left to execute his command.

Within a minute, Xiang Shaolong’s instructions have been communicated to everyone. They will act once they hear Jing Jun’s pre-arranged three continuous birdcalls.

On the first wave of birdcalls, Jing Jun and the warriors rapidly dived out from the flower bushes and stationed themselves at their allocated window or door.

The birdcalls are broadcast again.

Sounds of door breaking and windows shattering reverberated throughout the residence.

For the main hall, Jing Jun was the first to break through a window. Before he even landed on the ground, he unleashed a flurry of arrows around him, heralding the start of a close combat sequence.

An arrow pierced the throat of a man near the window and he collapsed at once. As the other men scrambled to their feet in horror, they were simultaneously hit by at least three arrows, tragically dying on the spot. It is not known if Bian Dongshan is one of them.

From the rear courtyards, dreadful shrieks were heard but they are quickly replaced by silence.

Minutes later, ten warriors escorted a lady who is carrying her baby son in her arms and four female maids who are shocked out of their wits to Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun who are standing in the centre of the hall.

Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun exchanged a look. The lady turned out to be Lu Family's Third Mistress Lu Niangrong.

Although there is no trace of blood on Lu Niangrong's face, her eyes are brimming with determination and blazing with extreme hatred. In her arms, the child is peacefully playing with his own collar, completely oblivious to the oncoming catastrophe.

Clenching her teeth, she viciously swore: "Go ahead and kill us! Dad will definitely avenge us."

Never in his wildest dream did Xiang Shaolong anticipate the presence of Lu Niangrong. Momentarily, he was stunned into silence. After all, he is still feeling apologetic towards Lu Niangrong and would not extent his hatred for Lu Buwei onto his daughter.

Jing Jun icily smirked: "Revenge! Humph! Your father can barely fend for himself, how can he hope to protect you? If you are feeling unjustified, you can only blame it on yourself for being his flesh and blood."

Lu Niangrong furiously challenged: "Shut up! Who gave you the right to speak

to me like that?”

Xiang Shaolong extended his hand just in time to prevent Jing Jun from slapping Lu Niangrong. Softening his tone, he examined: “What brings Third Mistress here?”

Lu Niangrong coldly grinned: “My affairs are none of your concern.”

The Wu Family Special Forces members instantly flared up and grunted menacing. Once Xiang Shaolong gave the green light, they would hack her to pieces. Simultaneously, the eight legs of the four maids turned into jelly and with a series of ‘ku dong’ sounds, the maids collapse onto the floor and one of them was so shocked she fainted on the spot. The baby started to cry with a high pitch.

Signaling his men to hold their ground, Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Putting aside all other matters, isn’t Third Mistress worried about the infant in your arms?”

Lowering her head to pacify her treasured baby, Lu Niangrong’s face is streaming with hot tears. In a pitiful tone, she grieved: “If Zhongxie is dead, life has no more meaning for us, mother and son.”

At this juncture, someone reported: “Target is reaching the residence soon!”

Lu Niangrong resolutely raised her head and faced Xiang Shaolong, her pretty eyes radiating with a pleading expression. In fact, Xiang Shaolong’s anguish is not inferior to hers. He had promised Xiao Pan that he will present Guan Zhongxie’s head to him at the coronation ceremony. Now that he is facing Lu

Niangrong mother and son, he cannot harden his heart.

Xiang Shaolong has promised Xiao Pan that he will present Guan Zhongxie's head to him at the coronation ceremony. Now that he is facing Lu Niangrong mother and son, he cannot harden his heart.

He does not have the luxury of time to slowly contemplate the situation. Xiang Shaolong ordered: "Miss Lu, please take a seat."

To Lu Niangrong, he added: "Should Third Mistress try to shout a warning, Brother Guan will certainly die tonight. Aye! Do you trust me, Xiang Shaolong?"

Hearing his words, Lu Niangrong was taken aback while Jing Jun frowned with disapproval. Struggling to say something, he eventually kept quiet.

Under the light drizzle and night breeze, an unprepared Guan Zhongxie stepped over the ledge into the courtyard. By the time he realizes something is amiss, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun had mugged him from the left and right, overpowering him in an instance.

Recognizing his prowess, the warriors disarmed him. When they are about to bind his hands, Xiang Shaolong motioned them to stop. He enquired: "Why didn't Brother Guan inform Little Brother that you are back."

From his voice, Guan Zhongxie realized that he is Xiang Shaolong. He demanded in a deep voice: "Where is Niangrong?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed with a breath: “Sister in law and your son are safe and sound. Let’s talk inside!”

Noting the capture of Guan Zhongxie, Lu Nianrong instantly broke down and wept incessantly.

Glancing bitterly once at the mother and son, an exasperated Guan Zhongxie sat down at a faraway corner as indicated by Xiang Shaolong. Crestfallen, he surrendered: “Although I, Guan Zhongxie, is unwilling to admit defeat, I must say that I am certainly not your, Xiang Shaolong’s, match.”

Subsequently, he lowered his head and pleaded: “Can you let them off? I only ask for an honorable death.”

Xiang Shaolong is feeling touched. For the first time, he can feel this formidable nemesis treating Lu Nianrong mother and son with true love, explaining his subservient and begging tone.

Furthermore, this is definitely not an appropriate time but still, Lu Nianrong risked her life to meet up with Guan Zhongxie, clearly demonstrating their loving relationship.

As Xiang Shaolong pondered, Jing Jun interrupted: “Third Brother! I wish to have a word with you.”

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: “Let’s talk later! I understand your concern.”

Turning to the vulnerable Guan Zhongxie, Xiang Shaolong grilled: “Brother

Guan should recognize the fact that your Father in law's days are numbered and Lao Ai cannot amount to much. Brother Guan, what are your plans?"

Guan Zhongxie shuddered once. Lifting his head to face Xiang Shaolong, his eyes glowed with utter disbelief.

Jing Jun panicked: "How are we going to answer to Crown Prince?"

Regaining his composure, Xiang Shaolong plainly decided: "I know what to do. Brother Guan, you have yet to tell me about your plans?"

Guan Zhongxie exhaled once: "Brother Xiang is not afraid that I may send word to Imperial Uncle or Lao Ai?"

Xiang Shaolong replied: "That is why I must get Brother Guan to promise me that you will not do so. Anyway, I will escort Sister in law and Brother Guan separately from Yongdu. Both of you shall sail to Chu. By then, even if Brother Guan wishes to send word, it would be too late. Without anyone working with you, Brother Guan is like a single hand that cannot clap; all your efforts will be futile."

Looking once at his wife and son at another corner, Guan Zhongxie's eyes started to shimmer with unbounded tenderness. Shifting his gaze back to Xiang Shaolong, he stretched out his giant hand.

Xiang Shaolong reached out and gripped his hand firmly. In a sincere tone, he wished: "Brother Guan, bon voyage."

His two eyes turning slightly red, Guan Zhongxie lightly thanked: “Even though we have always been enemies, Brother Xiang is the man I, Guan Zhongxie, admire most. Thank you!”

That night, the residence where Guan Zhongxie is hiding erupted into a sea of inferno. After the fire has been put out, more than thirty male corpses were unearthed. To Lao Ai and his men, it is a complete mystery.

Only Han Jie knows the truth. Scared out of his wits, he deserted Lao Ai and fled Yongdu. Since then, there is no news of him.

Early next morning, accompanied by Jing Jun, Xiang Shaolong who is disguised as Wu Guo finally contacted An Guxi. Together, they await the arrival of Qin’s Crown Prince, who is currently travelling along the Yellow River and will subsequently be coronated three days later.

Chapter 09

The Cruel Truth

Comprising of more than a hundred large, three-mast ships, the colossus Imperial Fleet is sailing commandingly against the current towards the southern harbour of Yongdu.

Ahead of the fleet, two battleships unloaded a hundred Palace Guards which rapidly assembled to form a protection squad, exhibiting a fearsome and serious ambience.

Leading the officials of Yongdu, Lao Ai formed a welcoming party at the harbour.

Disguised as Wu Guo, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun remained at the side of An Guxi, viewing the enormous fleet from a distance.

Jing Jun leaned towards Xiang Shaolong and whispered: "Take a closer look at Lao Ai; I am certain he did not sleep well last night."

Not knowing that Han Jie had flown the coop, of course Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun are puzzled over Lao Ai's lethargic appearance.

The royal ship of Xiao Pan rumbled as it begins to approach the shore.

Jing Jun was restless: "If that fellow Wu Guo failed in his impersonation and is

escorted down the ship with ropes tied around him, what should we do?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “The only way is for me to confess to Yingzheng that we are trying to confuse the enemy. Nonetheless, our scheme will fall apart.”

At this juncture, An Guxi turned to Jing Jun and cheered: “It has been a long time since I laid my eyes on Third Brother. In my heart, I have been pining for him. Come!”

Patting his horse, he rode forward.

The two men hurriedly followed him.

As the gangplank slide down the side of the ship, from the shore, Lao Ai ordered the musicians to play a welcoming song.

First off the ship are three hundred Palace Guards who formed a three layer human wall on the left and right while maintaining a ten feet gap in the centre. Their well-synchronized movements are neat and pleasing to the eye.

An Guxi and the others jumped off their horses and kneeled at the side of the horse.

Taking large strides, Lord Changwen took the lead in coming down the gangplank. Behind him are twenty elite palace guards who are responsible for clearing the travelling path of obstructions. The first two palace guards are bearing the royal flag and clan flag respectively.

Hot on their heels are ten palace attendants bearing gifts and prayer accessories. Behind them are another twenty palace guards before the appearance of the future Qin Shihuang Xiao Pan and his Crown Princess. Surrounding Xiao Pan and his wife are various important officials such as Lord Changping, Wang Guan, Li Si, Cai Zhe, Qin Qing with a head veil and of course, Wu Guo who is disguised as Xiang Shaolong. Together, they alighted from the ship.

Beyond the barrage of Palace Guards, tens of thousands of Yongdu dwellers instantly exploded into earth-shattering cheers and calls of 'Your Majesty'. Kneeling down to pay their respects to Xian Pan, it was a highly robust scene.

Seeing that Wu Guo is 'unmolested', Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun heaved a sigh of relief.

Xiang Shaolong stole a glance at Lao Ai who is a distance away from him and noticed his face darkening at the welcoming cheers of the crowd. He inwardly sighed: You are just a gigolo who managed to obtain your current official position through nepotism. In terms of military might, popularity vote and image, you are simply no match for Qin Shihuang.

With an expressionless face, Xiao Pan acknowledged Lao Ai's congratulations. With Crown Princess, he boarded the royal carriage. Under the protection of Lord Changwen's Palace Guards, the carriage drove towards the city gates while An Guxi and his forces provided additional security along the road, guaranteeing a flawless journey. Seizing an opportunity, Xiang Shaolong and Jing Jun boarded Wu Guo's carriage. Both Xiang Shaolong and Wu Guo swiftly removed their masks and clothes before switching their attires.

Wu Guo proudly proclaimed: “Fortunately, I am good at malingering; otherwise, it is really hard to handle all the socialization.”

Xiang Shaolong probed: “Did Crown Prince approach you?”

Wu Guo answered: “He merely sent the Imperial Physicians to check on me. He did mention that after landing in Yongdu, he requires that I accompany him to Dazheng Palace to pay his respects to Empress.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “What?”

At this moment, An Guxi finally found the time to ride to their carriage. Xiang Shaolong hastily sat on Wu Guo’s earlier seat and smiled: “Greetings to General.”

An Guxi appears to be ignorant about the friction between him and Xiao Pan. He chuckled: “Shaolong can simply address me as Guxi like before! Shaolong is truly remarkable and is a pillar of our Great Qin.”

Xiang Shaolong engaged An Guxi in an uninteresting conversation. When the convoy is entering the city, An Guxi excused himself and speedily attended to his affairs.

Leaning on the back of his chair, Xiang Shaolong heaved a sigh of relief.

The first part of his plan has reached a successful conclusion. The remaining plan is to try and survive Xiao Pan’s hidden attack and flee back to Xianyang.

With Crown Princess and a large group of officials, Xiao Pan disembarked from his carriage in front of Dazheng Palace's main hall.

Noting that Xiao Pan is accompanied by numerous officials, Xiang Shaolong began to relax. He secretly thought: It would be disastrous if Xiao Pan and himself were the only ones who are meeting Zhu Ji.

After Ji Yanran's reminder, he excruciatingly forced himself to face the stark reality: Zhu Ji is beyond redemption and it is impossible for her to forsake Lao Ai and leave with him.

Is there a way to protect her from the impending massacre?

There is some hope.

But after losing Lao Ai and her sons, and realizing that Xiao Pan is not her own flesh and blood, what is the point of living? She would be passing her days like a lifeless zombie.

At this interval, Mao Jiao came out of the hall. After kneeling down to pay his respects, he announced: "Today, Empress is not feeling well and does not wish to face a large crowd. She specifically asks for Crown Prince and Great General only."

Everyone was taken aback.

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong exchanged glances. Both of them were having the same thought: If there were soldiers ambushing them from within the

hall, wouldn't the two of them end up as mincemeat?

Lord Changwen insisted: "General (I) has to escort Crown Prince at all times."

Standing beside them, Lao Ai cheekily remarked: "Empress is merely against a huge number of visitors. Of course the Head of the Palace Guards must accompany Crown Prince!"

Xiao Pan suddenly declared: "It's all right! To enter the palace and pay my respects, Guaren only requires Great General's company."

Noting Mao Jiao secretly signaling Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong finally comprehended Xiao Pan's abrupt display of bravery.

Gesturing at Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan boldly ascended the stairs to the hall. Xiang Shaolong hastily chased up to him.

Without turning his head back, Xiao Pan whispered: "In your opinion, what is that lady thinking of?"

Xiang Shaolong whispered in reply: "She probably wants to clarify matters and from our meeting, she will decide whether she wants to support Lao Ai whole-heartedly or otherwise."

Without the least hint of surprise, Xiao Pan coldly hissed: "This is called: Making one mistake after another."

Xiang Shaolong wanted to make a last ditch attempt to remind Xiao Pan to

keep his promise. But he is also fully aware that his effort would be in vain. Therefore, he suppressed the urge to talk about it.

Perched high up on her Empress throne, Zhu Ji is alone in the hall. As their boots stepped on the floor of the massive hall, the sound of footsteps somewhat produces a chilling sensation.

The empty and spacious hall is cold, lifeless and uninviting

Although Zhu Ji is slightly chubbier, she is still as attractive as ever and there weren't any signs of aging. The only distinguishable factor is some haggardness in her features. Frostily eyeing the two men bowing to her, Zhu Ji plainly state: "Royal Son, Great General, please have a seat."

Both men sat down on the first two seats to her right. Xiao Pan simply followed the palace protocol and commented: "Witnessing Empress Mother radiating with even more brilliance than the past, Royal Son is filled with joy."

Zhu Ji sighed with a breath: "How long has it been since I laid my eyes on Royal Son? I believe it is at least three or four years! Sometimes, I felt as if I never gave birth to a son like you."

His eyes flashing once with a killing aura, Xiao Pan quickly faked an air of reverence: "Empress Mother is mistaken. Royal Son is fully occupied with matters of the State and on top of that, I do not wish to disturb Empress Mother's recuperation. Royal Son still loves and care for Empress Mother just like before."

Xiang Shaolong stared blankly at the space in front of him. In his heart, he wished he was dreaming, for the truth is simply too unbearable.

Remembering the earlier days in Handan when Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan are loving each other to bits, they have come to a stage when both parties are lying through their teeth and mutually scheming against each other.

Her gaze landing on Xiang Shaolong, Zhu Ji's voice became gentle as she acknowledged: "I have yet to congratulate Great General on your triumphant return!"

Staring intensely at her, Xiang Shaolong can feel his heart being overwhelmed by immense and genuine sensations of guilt and affections. He sighed: "It was due to luck that I managed to preserve my life! It is not worthy of Empress's commendation."

Her delicate eyes turning chilly, Zhu Ji interrogated: "Recently, the rumours surrounding the heritage of Crown Prince is spreading like wildfire. What counter strategies do Great General propose? I hope you can say something to calm my nerves."

Xiao Pan icily interrupted: "Royal Son has issued a State-wide decree, prohibiting anyone from discussing this matter. I hope Empress can understand my position and put your doubts to rest."

Zhu Ji blew her top: "As your natural mother, am I barred from discussing it too?"

Xiao Pan replied with indifference: “Royal Son dare not. However, Great General is not permitted to violate the decree.”

Zhu Ji started laughing in an unnatural way. She pitifully observed: “It nearly slipped my mind. Three days later, Royal Son will be officially crowned; naturally, you cannot be bothered with me, Empress.”

Xiao Pan plainly state: “Empress Mother is mistaken about Royal Son. At the end of the day, the slanders that Empress Mother heard are deliberately cooked up by evil villains who wishes to disrupt the relationship between us, mother and son.”

Subsequently, he stood up and declared: “Empress Mother’s health is far from ideal; it is not good for you to get agitated. Royal Son is taking my leave. At a later date, I shall pay my respects to Empress Mother again!”

Up till now, Xiang Shaolong did not have a chance to speak out.

He could only sighed to himself. Even if Xiao Pan did not have the intention to kill her, based on Zhu Ji’s words, she has basically sentenced herself to death.

To make it worse, Xiang Shaolong is incapable of saving her.

This is because Zhu Ji no longer treats him with goodwill. The goodwill has been replaced by the bitterest hatred of all.

She has already jumped to the conclusion that Xiang Shaolong had deceived

her, and may even assume that Xiang Shaolong has killed her real son.

Given these circumstances, what can he do?

Qinian Palace.

In the Imperial Study, Xiao Pan received the giant steel bow of Guan Zhongxie that Xiang Shaolong had presented to him. He burst out laughing: "Official Guan, if you did not end up as a muddle-headed ghost, you should have realized that you made the worst mistake of your life by choosing to collaborate with Lu Buwei years ago."

Standing on Xiao Pan's left and right are Li Si, Lord Changping, Lord Changwen, An Guxi, Wang Guan and several other officials. One by one, they congratulated Xiang Shaolong for drawing first blood.

As if a huge burden is lifted off his shoulders, Xiao Pan placed the steel bow on his table and motioned for the officials to take a seat. With a thrilled smile, he faced Xiang Shaolong and commended: "It is a pity we are unable to secure Zhongxie's head, nonetheless, Guaren fully agrees with Official Jing's actions: By destroying the bodies and other physical evidence, we would not alert the rebels to our presence."

Pausing, he added: "Over the next few days, we must be very careful with our food and drink. Or else, we may fall prey to Lao Ai's venomous hands."

Lord Changping cheerfully replied: "Crown Prince can put your mind at ease. Officials (We) will be extra cautious."

Scanning the faces of everyone in the study, Xiao Pan's gaze eventually landed on Xiang Shaolong. In a gentle voice, he inquired: "Is Great General feeling better?"

Shaking his head, Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: "While fleeing for my life at the borders of Han and Wei, I have overexerted my body. Back then, I can force myself to endure the agony. Unexpectedly, after my return, I suffered countless relapses. The amount of medication I am taking is enough to strike fear into my heart. "

Xiao Pan appreciated: "In this case, over the next few days, Great General must have a good rest and refrain from participating in strenuous activities!"

Subsequently, his royal eyes turned frosty as he icily rumbled: "It has been ascertained that Lao Ai and his gang will begin their rebellion during the royal dinner banquet, which is taking place the same day after the coronation ceremony. Does Great General have any bright ideas?"

Xiang Shaolong simply remarked: "He who moves first gain the initiative; he who moves later loses the initiative. Such is the timeless truth."

Slamming his palm on the long table in front of his dragon throne, Xiao Pan sighed: "With this proverb alone, our victory is assured."

Wang Guan frowned: "Pardon subordinate's incomprehension but didn't we decide earlier to wait for the rebels to make their move first before charging them with the act and consequently launching our counterattack?"

Xiao Pan compellingly chuckled: “Earlier decisions are based on earlier circumstances; Present decisions are based on present circumstances. Regardless of the methods employed, victory is our top priority. We shall make our move before the royal banquet and catch him with his pants down.”

Li Si commented: “The atrocious traitor Lao Ai will probably die without even realizing what is the cause of his downfall.”

Of course Li Si is referring to Mao Jiao the super spy. Because of his meticulous efforts, Xiao Pan is fully conscious of Lao Ai’s manpower, preparations and rebellion timing, allowing him to plan his moves accordingly.

Appearing to be brimming with confidence, Xiao Pan nonchalantly articulated: “Two hours before the royal banquet, Senior General An shall take my decree and seize military control of the city. All the entrances and exits must be secured and no one is allowed to leave. This would surely provoke Lao Ai into commencing his rebellion at an earlier timing. Concurrently, the Palace Guards shall seal off Qinian Palace. On one hand, they can safeguard our officials. On the other hand, they can arrest enemy spies within our cohort according to the name list.”

Pausing, he added: “Simultaneously, Great General Wang and his massive army shall enter the city and decimate every single insurgent while Great General Xiang and Guaren shall move in and attack Dazheng Palace. Hng! Guaren is interested to know what will be Lao Ai’s final consequence.

Everyone expressed praises and approval.

Only Xiang Shaolong can recognize the inkling in his words; if he does not come up with a good solution, Dazheng Palace shall be his final resting place.

Xiang Shaolong returned to his designated courtyard at the rear of Qinian Palace. His immediate neighbour Qin Qing and Ji Yanran who is in the guise of a maid have sneaked in and are chatting with the two men Jing Jun and Wu Guo.

Noticing Xiang Shaolong, the two ladies are especially delighted.

Sitting down, Xiang Shaolong questioned: "Did you manage to contact Fourth Brother?"

Jing Jun nodded: "While Third Brother is off to Dazheng Palace, I used the opportunity to meet up with him."

Ji Yanran probed: "What did Zhu Ji say?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "The situation is dreadful. Her relationship with Crown Prince is irreparable. "

After answering, he turned to Jing Jun and enquired: "What did Fourth Brother say?"

Jing Jun reported: "Fourth Brother mentioned that Crown Prince has ordered him to barricade Yongdu with immediate effect. Unless they have a special

travel pass, no one is allowed to leave or enter.”

Xiang Shaolong was thunderstruck: “Crown Prince is lying to me again. Minutes ago, he mentioned that the barricade will only be set up after the coronation and before the royal banquet.”

Qin Qing was terrified: “What should we do?”

After contemplating, Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “It would be easy for me to leave. I can officially propose to Crown Prince that I am sending some men back to Xianyang to increase the fighting prowess of Second Brother. Disguised as Wu Guo, I can simply walk out of Yongdu unchallenged. It is not difficult for Wu Guo too. By resuming his original appearance and with Fourth Brother assisting him, his getaway is assured. My main issue is Sister Qing. In the name of security, Yingzheng would definitely send men to keep you under strict surveillance. What can we do to counter this?”

Ji Yanran wondered: “Has Hubby decided on your departure schedule?”

Xiang Shaolong responded: “By right, Jing Jun and I should leave for Xianyang tomorrow. Aye! But how can I leave the two of you behind? Crown Prince knows me too well.”

Ji Yanran giggled: “Then let’s leave together!”

Everyone stared at this gorgeous Talented Lady with amazement.

Qin Qing cheered: “Yanran, stop beating around the bush. What brilliant

strategy did you come up with?”

Ji Yanran elatedly narrated: “I was inspired by Hubby’s earlier words; we shall exploit the ambiguous relationship between Empress and Crown Prince. Think about it, if Empress asks for our Grand Tutor Qin to keep her company in Dazheng Palace, how would Crown Prince react?”

Everyone was full of praises for her ingenuity.

Qin Qing joyfully proclaimed: “In this aspect, I can apply some trickery and make it impossible for Crown Prince to reject.”

Everyone knows that Qin Qing is extremely familiar with the intricacies of the palace’s affairs. To her, it’ll be a piece of cake.

Ji Yanran added: “Additionally, this tactic would give Crown Prince the false impression that Hubby no longer wishes to flee. Unknown to him, before our Grand Tutor Qin arrives at Dazheng Palace, she would have vanished en route.” Wu Guo asked: “And when should I, this imposter Great General, start to make my getaway?”

Xiang Shaolong cautioned: “Basically, you have to react to the ever-changing conditions. Notwithstanding, preserving your life is of utmost importance. You must remember to leave before the beginning of the coronation. Or else, by then, Yingzheng would not let you out of his sight.”

Ji Yanran suggested: “You should probably leave on the night before the coronation! With a two days window, we should be able to take down Lu

Buwei.”

Jing Jun reminded: “Do not loiter around Xianyang; get back to the farms as soon as possible. After we have reassembled, we can then make our final escape according to our plans. That would be our grand finale.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “After years of hardship, it is time for Heaven to grant me days of leisure and a mind free from worries!”

The eyes of everybody were lost in a series of flashbacks. In their ears, they could somewhat hear the hoof beats of a vibrant horse galloping freely across the green prairie of the borderlands.

Chapter 10

The Takeover of Xianyang

That very night, Xiang Shaolong sought an audience with Xiao Pan, indicating his desire to send Jing Jun and his troops back to Xianyang in order to reinforce Teng Yi against Lu Buwei.

Without any grounds to deny his request, Xiao Pan agreed on the spot, giving Xiang Shaolong the opportunity to openly and fearlessly make preparations for shipping and logistics.

Early next morning, Qin Qing paid Xiao Pan a visit too, professing that she has received Empress's invitation to stay in Dazheng Palace for a few days.

Not suspecting anything and coupled with Qin Qing's insistence, Xiao Pan gave his permission.

Disguised as Wu Family Warriors, Qin Qing and Ji Yanran were escorted by another eight authentic Wu Family Warriors. Together, they unabashedly strode out of Qinian Palace. Along the way, they rendezvoused with Xiang Shaolong and they jointly concealed themselves among the entourage of Jing Jun. After hiding their carriage in an inconspicuous location, they immediately left the city and boarded their ship. Sailing along the current and aided by a favourable wind, they arrived at Xianyang in half a day's time. Landing at the predetermined shore, they waited for an hour before Teng Yi, Tao Fang and Xiao Yuetan came to pick them up. Noticing the presence of

Qin Qing and Ji Yanran, the welcoming trio is exceptionally thrilled and their morale is boosted to a higher echelon.

Teng Yi chuckled: "Everything is prepared and we are simply waiting for Great General's leadership and instructions."

Xiang Shaolong laughingly threw a punch at Teng Yi's beefy shoulder, declaring: "Even Second Brother is making fun of me; I'm sure you are feeling really happy. Presently, we only have a two-day window. Thus, we must act at once."

Ji Yanran questioned Xiao Yuetan: "Any news from Manager Tu?"

Xiao Yuetan answered: "Master Tu, his family and his three hundred loyal brethren are prepared and in position. Once we give the word, they'll drug the water."

Teng Yi advised: "It is critical to time our attacks well. As Manager Tu is doping the wells, we have to simultaneously seize control of Xu Shang's Imperial Infantry. This is to ensure a safe passage for Manager Tu's family and followers. In addition, it will prevent Old Traitor Lu from eluding our capture."

Xiao Yuetan sighed: "This is precisely the limitation of the anesthetic. Due to its strength, the drug will take effect almost immediately. The only way to maximize its effect is to apply the drug at dinnertime. Nonetheless, it is difficult to tell how many would fall prey to it."

Jing Jun proposed: "If we secretly besiege Imperial Uncle Residence, Lu Buwei will surely fall into our clutches."

Xiang Shaolong checked: "Is Manager Tu aware of the secret tunnels of Imperial Uncle Residence?"

Xiao Yuetan explained: "During the construction of Imperial Uncle Residence, Master Tu is undergoing the lowest point in his career. Merely responsible for purchasing building materials, he does not possess the slightest knowledge about this aspect."

Xiang Shaolong mused: "In this case, we have to deploy some signaling outposts outside the city. Aye! Unless we have Crown Prince's royal decree, we are unable to prevent him from leaving the city. Furthermore, it would arouse the suspicions of our Imperial Cavalry lieutenants. As a result, it is better for us to pursue him with our own forces."

Turning to Qin Qing, Xiang Shaolong instructed: "Sister Qing can now proceed to your residence under the escort of Master Tao. After selecting your followers, the rest of your staff should be fittingly dismissed. Upon completion, you should head to the farms at once and await patiently for our good news."

Affected by the calm before the storm, Qin Qing bit her lower lip and nodded once.

As Xiang Shaolong's heart is flooded with tenderness, Ji Yanran questioned Teng Yi: "Recently, did you uncover any traces of the adversaries?"

When she mentioned ‘adversaries’, everyone knew that Ji Yanran is referring to Wei Liao and his army of forty thousand soldiers. All the eyes are now centered at Teng Yi.

With a bewildered expression, Teng Yi remarked: “I am equally baffled as there is no indication of their existence.”

Xiao Yuetan made a guess: “Presently, we are in a race against time. In my opinion, Wei Liao and his forces should be camping further upriver. Once he receives Yingzheng’s decree, he can easily sail to Xianyang within a short span of time. If we move fast enough, we can depart Xianyang long before the arrival of Wei Liao.”

Not giving a hoot, Xiang Shaolong excitedly hailed: “It’s showtime.”

Everybody enthusiastically affirmed his words.

Still disguised as Wu Guo, Xiang Shaolong entered the city and headed to the Imperial Cavalry Command Centre. Resuming his original appearance, he simultaneously summoned the lieutenants of Imperial Cavalry and Palace Guards who had stayed behind to fortify Xianyang. Displaying his Tiger Seal, he proclaimed that he is acting on the orders of Crown Prince to return to Xianyang in order to regain control of the three armies of Xianyang and guard against any potential uprising.

Of course the lieutenants are aware of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai’s working partnership. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong has always been Crown Prince’s confidante and his personal standing is unmatched. Coupled with the

appearance of the Tiger Seal, they are fully convinced and pledged their willingness to fulfill their duties even at the cost of their lives.

Once he completed his deployments, Xiang Shaolong and his companions raced towards the Imperial Infantry Command Centre.

At this time, the lanterns are in the process of being lighted. Within the city, the ambience is tranquil and there is nothing out of the ordinary.

First of all, Xiang Shaolong ordered the Palace Guards and Imperial Cavalry to barricade the Command Centre before personally barging in with Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Ji Yanran, Xiao Yuetan and his other compatriots.

Before the sentries could sound the alarm, they are overwhelmed by Xiang Shaolong and his men.

At this juncture, Xu Shang was having a discussion with his lieutenants in the main hall. Caught unprepared by Xiang Shaolong's gatecrashing, he did not even have the chance to react when his life is already threatened by more than ten crossbows.

The countenance of Xu Shang and his lieutenants changed at once.

This Shangcai number one swordsman did not even have the opportunity to pull his personal sword out of his waist sheathe as this invasion is simply unforeseeable. Especially when Xiang Shaolong should logically be at Yongdu.

Maintaining his coolness, Xu Shang demanded in a deep voice: "Great

General, what do you mean by this?"

After his men have disarmed Xu Shang and his lieutenants, Xiang Shaolong displayed the Tiger Seal and broadcasted: "General (I) is acting on Crown Prince's orders. From this second onwards, the Imperial Infantry shall fall under my jurisdiction. Who dares to disobey?"

Witnessing the Tiger Seal, Xu Shang realizes that he is stripped of his military authority and is now a powerless commoner like before. The lieutenants stared at Xiang Shaolong with a dumbfounded expression.

Noting that he has the situation under control, Xiang Shaolong directed: "Except for Commander Xu, escort the others to prison." When Xu Shang is alone, Xiang Shaolong took the main seat and ordered Xu Shang to sit down at a side. After retrieving Xu Shang's Imperial Infantry Seal, Teng Yi and Jing Jun left the hall to begin their takeover of the Imperial Infantry. Xu Shang bitterly smiled: "You have won!"

His words carrying a double meaning, Xiang Shaolong plainly state: "This is predetermined fate. I, Xiang Shaolong, am just acting my part! Ever since Lu Buwei poisoned and murdered the late king, that traitor is destined to suffer a terrifying demise. The problem is; is Brother Xu concerned about your personal consequence?"

His eyes flashing with hope, Xu Shang wondered in a deep voice: "Will Great General be willing to let me off?"

Xiang Shaolong chortled: "Brother Xu should know that I am not a ruthless

killing machine. Even Guan Zhongxie and Third Mistress have been spared by me. Right now, they should have arrived in Chu. Brother Xu, what future would you choose for yourself?"

Learning that Guan Zhongxie has failed and has fled for his life after being released by Xiang Shaolong, Xu Shang broke down. He sighed: "Great General is truly peerless. What do you want from me?"

Xiang Shaolong negotiated: "Once Brother Xu reveals Lu Buwei's emergency escape route, I will immediately escort Brother Xu and your family out of the city."

Whilst Xu Shang is contemplating and hesitating, Xiang Shaolong prompted: "If Brother Xu still wishes to hear Lan Gongyuan's angelic voice, you must come to a quick decision."

Ji Yanran gently reminded: "Even if Lu Buwei manages to flee from Xianyang, certain death awaits him. Brother Xu had better not let this opportunity slip by."

Xiao Yuetan plainly announced: "I am Xiao Yuetan; Brother Xu should have heard of me!"

Xu Shang stared at Xiao Yuetan with amazement: "Didn't you die a long time ago?"

Xiao Yuetan viciously snarled: "If I did not fake my death; do you think Lu Buwei will allow me to live till today? Do you really believe that Lu Buwei

appreciates you and your talent? As a subordinate of Lu Buwei, you are nothing but a pawn that he can kill or abandon at will, do you understand?”

Xu Shang finally conceded. He disclosed: “Inside the bedroom of Imperial Uncle, there is a secret passageway that leads to a huge mansion along Bai Tong Street, near the south of the city. That’s all I know.”

Xiang Shaolong eagerly stood up. After waiting for nearly ten excruciatingly years, the time is finally ripe to take the life of his arch nemesis Lu Buwei.

As Xiang Shaolong and his men lay siege to the passageway exit, every single one of them is feeling perplexed.

Four hours ago, when Tu Xian led Jing Jun, Teng Yi and their troops into Imperial Uncle Residence, they discovered comatose individuals strewn all over the property. However, they are unable to locate Lu Buwei. He has evidently made his escape through the secret tunnel.

Furthermore, there are no reports of Lu Buwei leaving the city; could he be hiding in Xianyang?

That does not make sense.

Jing Jun proposed: “Let’s conduct a complete sweep of the city. We’ll definitely trace him.”

Tu Xian advocated: “Why don’t we search this empty residence first? If my presumption is correct, there must be another secret passageway from this

residence to another property or warehouse near the city wall. From there, a final tunnel will lead to an exit outside the city.”

Teng Yi immediately gestured to his troops and they rapidly began searching.

Ji Yanran sighed: “If this is true, we have lost the game by merely one move. Unfortunately, our signal outposts are only paying attention to the travellers leaving Xianyang City.”

Xiao Yuetan suggested: “Traitor Lu cannot bear to part with his treasures and valuables. Additionally, travelling through tunnels is much slower than travelling on roads. Why don’t we take a gamble? Let’s assume he has left the tunnels and is travelling by foot towards the borders. I am making this conjecture because Xianyang’s river routes are under our control.”

Xiang Shaolong decisively ordered: “Cease the search. Let’s leave the city at once.” Xiang Shaolong, his companions and two hundred over Wu Family Special Forces members rode swiftly out of the city and in the direction of Zhao. In the blink of an eye, they discovered footprints about one mile away from Xianyang City. Some of the footprints are very deep, indicating a heavy load on its owner.

Xiang Shaolong and his followers are ecstatic.

Jing Jun frowned instead: “Judging by the footprints, there are more than two thousand of them. Their strength is way above ours.”

Teng Yi scoffed: “For someone on the run, he is surely lacking in courage. In

addition, part of their group is made up of women and children. There is nothing worth fearing.”

In a serious demeanour, Xiang Shaolong indicated: “Within the family warriors of Lu Clan, there is no shortage of experts. If we were to catch up to their tail, they may learn about our strength and engage us in a fight to the death. Although we may not lose, death and injury cannot be avoided. It is not a feasible plan.”

Ji Yanran recommended: “If we can somehow estimate Lu Buwei’s flight path, we can take advantage of our horses and speed to overtake them. From there, we can ambush him and confront him head on. As this technique will not betray our strength, the odds are more favourable.”

Tu Xian is best acquainted with Lu Buwei’s affairs. He deduced: “Judging from the direction of the footprints, they should be fleeing towards Wu Chang City, a developed City that is situated downriver from Xianyang. The city mayor is Lu Buwei’s trusted confidante. From there, they can board a ship and sail towards the east. Otherwise, with their mere feet, how far can they run?”

Teng Yi enthusiastically cheered: “En route to Wu Chang is a valley named Windstorm Valley. To reach Wu Chang, they must travel through it. With our horses and including a detour, we can easily make it to the valley within four hours. Why don’t we wait there for the esteemed arrival of Imperial Uncle!”

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: “You reap what you sow. If not for Master Tu ‘taking care’ of Old Traitor Lu for so many years, we would be the ones

leaving with our hands empty.”

Tu Xian chuckled: “It’s nothing. General Teng, please lead the way.”

With sky-high morale, the two hundred odd riders raced off like a gust of wind.

Chapter 11

Exacting Sweet Vengeance

At the darkest hour before dawn, a long procession of nearly three thousand human beings is entering Windstorm Valley in silence. Their only source of illumination and guidance is a few torches.

From the appearance of the procession, it is evident that these refugees are in a state of panic and disorder. Intermittently broken up into several sections, each batch of travellers are moving in an uncaring manner. Leaving the women and children to their own devices at the back of the procession, no assistance is rendered to the fallen.

Although everybody detests Lu Buwei to the core, they are filled with sympathy at the sight before their eyes.

Xiang Shaolong pondered: "I only wish to take the life of Old Traitor Lu. Is there a way of singling Lu Buwei out from so many people?"

Xiao Yuetan coldly chortled; "Given Old Traitor Lu's self-seeking character, he would definitely be at the head of the pack."

Pointing to the front of the convoy, he indicated: "There are a few human-pulled carts. Old Traitor Lu must be inside one of them."

Xiang Shaolong instructed: "In this case, once the first batch of hundred odd

individuals exit the valley, we can seal the valley with wood and stones. It'll be easier to capture him this way! Except for Old Traitor Lu, the others can go free!"

The minute Lu Buwei and his immediate group of hundred-odd refugees left the mouth of the valley, several tree trunks and countless giant boulders came crashing down suddenly from the top of a cliff. Momentarily, the area was engulfed by a huge cloud of dust and the booming noises of the falling objects shocked everyone out of their wits.

The wood and rocks that are pushed off the cliff instantly separated the procession in the most heartless manner. Falling into disarray, the refugees on both sides of the obstruction fled for their lives in opposite directions among the cries and shouts for help.

Some of them naturally fell down and were trampled all over by their fellow travellers. It felt like the apocalypse.

For those who managed to leave the valley, they are blindly running away when scores of torches are being lighted. As two hundred Wu Family Warriors rode towards Lu Buwei from all directions, they did not harm any of the porters and followers. They simply encircled the wretched-looking Lu Buwei who is presently protected by ten odd bodyguards.

In a split second, Lu Buwei is completely surrounded and he has reached the end of his tether.

Standing in the centre of a protective circle formed by his family warriors, Lu

Buwei's face is deadly pale and he is panting non-stop.

Together with Tu Xian, Xiao Yuetan, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong rode out from the crowd. Perched high up on his horse, he thundered: "Lu Buwei, years ago when you ambush my forces and murdered my wife and maids, did it ever cross your mind that there will be a day like today?"

Noticing Tu Xian and Xiao Yuetan, Lu Buwei was bristling with anger and hatred. As his body shook uncontrollably, he pointed his finger at them and bellowed: "Well done! To think that I, Lu Buwei, have been treating you two with benevolence, how dare you conspire with outsiders against me."

With a 'pui', Tu Xian spat a glob of saliva on the ground. Clenching his teeth, he cursed: "Shut your smelly mouth. I should be the one using these words against you. Despite my unwavering loyalty, you chose to sacrifice my bosom buddies in order to direct suspicions away from yourself. You are not fit to be human."

Xiao Yuetan scorned: "In the face of death, you are still incorrigible and full of shameless nonsense. Today, I am personally here to witness your demise because I want to prove the justice and righteous ways of Heaven. How dare you dispute the truth and make willful accusations?"

Lu Buwei was briefly dumbfounded. Noticing the hundreds of arrows aimed at his heart and waiting to be released, he lost his tongue.

In her shrill voice, Ji Yanran admonished: "The late King has always treated

you with kindness. However, you cold-bloodedly poisoned him to death. Lu Buwei, you are worse than a beast.” Teng Yi roared: “The deaths of Xu Xian and Lu Gong were all because of you. Heaven must be blind for keeping you alive for the past few years.”

Jing Jun instead bellowed: “You bunch of fools, are you thinking of accompanying him to his deathbed? Throw down your weapons at once and scam as far as your legs can carry you.”

The family warriors exchanged glances with one another. After the first weapon is discarded, everyone disappeared in a flash. What’s left is a freshly betrayed-by-his-men Lu Buwei standing alone in the centre of their encirclement.

Xiang Shaolong and his companions leapt off their horses and advanced towards Lu Buwei.

JIANG!

Xiang Shaolong unsheathed Hundred Battle Sabre.

Within a second, his mind has experienced countless flashbacks of the most heart-wrenching moments of his life, and they are all triggered by Lu Buwei.

Chunying and her fellow maids, his trusted subordinates, one by one, they started bleeding and eventually collapsing on the ground; in the prime of her youth, Zhao’s Third Princess turning into a lifeless corpse in his arms; the look of grievance in King Zhuangxiang’s eyes as he passed away; Lu Gong dying

with his eyes wide open, these images simultaneously recurred in his vision.

Feeling as if a huge boulder has been casted into his tranquil, mental lake, he is now overwhelmed by turbulent waves of grief.

Out of the blue, he discovered the Hundred Battle Sabre in his hand has penetrated the abdomen of Lu Buwei.

It was Lu Buwei's body that suddenly lunged forward and pierced itself against his Hundred Battle Sabre. Actually, Lu Buwei was smacked in the back by Teng Yi's Mozi Sword, causing him to stumble forward. In the ears of Xiang Shaolong, he could hear Teng Yi praying: "Princess Qian, this is for you. May your soul in heaven be appeased."

By the time Lu Buwei slumped against the body of Xiang Shaolong, he has turned into a lifeless corpse. All the fame and fortune of the world has nothing to do with him anymore.

Although Xiang Shaolong personally killed his nemesis, his heart is feeling empty. His mind totally blank, he did not experience any joy from exacting sweet vengeance.

He has grown to detest the mutual killings of humans.

The sky is finally brightening.

After three days and two nights of continuous riding, Xiang Shaolong and his followers could not withstand the fatigue anymore. Pitching tents, they took

a break.

They are one day's journey away from the farms.

During their voyage, Xiang Shaolong is extremely quiet.

That very night, the weather is excellent. Accompanied by a new crescent moon, the sky is star-studded. Spreading over the entire horizon, the stars are twinkling in clusters of varying sizes.

Leaving the campgrounds, Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran ascended a small hill. Leisurely sitting back to back on a turf of grass that is tall enough to reach their knees, they soak in the ambience of genuine and deep love as husband and wife.

Xiang Shaolong started to relax. Presently, Lu Buwei's issue seems to be miles away and the threat of Xiao Pan is literally non-existent.

He suddenly recalled a movie about Qin Shihuang that he watched in the 21st century. Lu Buwei certainly did not die the way he did.

After being implicated for recommending Lao Ai into officialdom, he was stripped of his Premiership by Yingzheng and exiled to Shiyi, Henan Province.

Nonetheless, still bearing malicious intentions, Lu Buwei remains in cahoots with the rich and powerful of the six States. Eventually, he was forced by Yingzheng to move to Zhuo Jun and was served with a warning letter.

Knowing that he cannot escape the gallows, Lu Buwei chose to commit suicide by drinking poisonous wine.

However, Xiang Shaolong was obviously the one who killed Lu Buwei with his sabre. Did he unconsciously change the course of history?

In the midst of his wild reflections, Ji Yanran's shrill voice sounded beside his ear: "Hubby, a penny for your thoughts?"

In the spur of the moment, Xiang Shaolong nearly wanted to make a full confession of his 'background' to his lovely wife. Ultimately, he suppressed the urge and bitterly smiled: "Even I do not know what I am thinking about."

Ji Yanran comforted: "Yanran understands Hubby's emotions. Human beings are really bizarre. Sometimes, we spare no effort and go all out to achieve a goal but once we succeeded, we would feel so empty and lost inside. Fortunately, this is not the trend for everything. For example, friendship between humans will get better with time and deeper as the days go by. Of course, there are also friends who would become your enemies!"

Xiang Shaolong nodded his head: "Listening to Yanran speaking is one of the greatest pleasures of my life. Being able to grow old together with Yanran at the borderlands, what more can I ask for?"

Snaking into Xiang Shaolong's bosom and using his shoulder as a pillow, Ji Yanran gazed intensively at the flickering stars in the sky with her pretty eyes. She faintly remarked: "Yesterday is the day Yingzheng becomes the official King of Qin. I wonder if Lao Ai and Empress are still... Aye... Yanran should not

have brought this up.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “My virtuous wife, I do not mind it one bit. In fact, I have come to terms with it. With our limited abilities, we can only achieve so much; we cannot possibly accomplish everything we set out to do. Concerning Empress, it is beyond my powers to protect her. For the time being, my only wish is to find Wu Guo and the others safe and sound when we arrive at the farms.”

Ji Yanran sighed: “Yanran also wishes to leave this place as soon as possible and never come back.”

First thing next morning, everybody packed their tents and resumed their journey. Following a predetermined secret route, they rode in the direction of the farms.

As evening approaches, the farms can be sighted from afar.

Riding at the head of the convoy, Jing Jun suddenly turned back. The expression on his face is horrendous.

Knowing that something is not right, everyone started to panic.

In a deep voice, Jing Jun reported: “The farms are surrounded by multiple layers of enemies.”

Under the limited glare of the moon and stars, the land is dimly illuminated. Perching on a higher elevation, they scanned the environment.

Entering their sights were tens of thousands of Qin soldiers who are laying siege at the perimeter of the farm. They are located outside the arrow firing range of the farm battlements.

Surprisingly, the battlements are in good condition. It is evident that the enemies have yet to launch an attack.

The Wu Fortress is completely dark, resembling a ferocious beast that is fast asleep.

From the side of the Qin troops, sounds of chopping wood and felling trees can be heard. Unmistakably, they are constructing war machines that are meant to attack the fortress.

In a fierce tone, Teng Yi wondered: “Logically, they should fake an attack in order to deplete our supply of arrows and wear us out physically. Why are they completely immobile instead?”

Remembering Qin Qing and the limited warriors within the fortress, Ji Yanran bit her lower lip in agitation, causing a trickle of blood to emerge. In a deep voice, she explained: “Wei Liao is waiting for our return. Luckily, they are not familiar with the terrain and did not expect us to use this secret path.”

Hit by a brainwave, Xiang Shaolong added: “That is not the main reason. Most importantly, he is waiting for Yingzheng to personally attack us in secret. This is the only way to prevent news from leaking out.”

After careful scrutiny, Xiao Yuetan confirmed that the entrance of the secret

tunnel is situated far away from the enemies' tents and war machine construction yard. Heaving a sigh of relief, he declared: "Before Yingzheng's arrival, we must fully utilize whatever precious time that remains. Using the secret passageway to return to the fortress, we must immediately grab everyone and depart at once."

Of course no one will object to his suggestion and everybody quickly jumped into action.

An hour later, they have entered the fortress without being detected. By the time Xiang Shaolong embraced Qin Qing's petite frame, it felt as if an entire lifetime has passed by.

As the warhorses have been trained to pass through the tunnels, no noises were generated and the enemy is still in the dark about their presence.

Out of the blue, Teng Yi stammered: "What? Wu Guo and the rest are not back?"

Xiang Shaolong is badly shaken. Lightly pushing Qin Qing away, he muttered in shock: "This is impossible."

Initially speaking with Teng Yi, Tao Fang sadly conveyed: "Looks like Wu Guo is in trouble."

Pausing for a while, he added: "Last night, the enemies abruptly appeared at the perimeter of the farms. In fact, they have surrounded us and advanced towards us from all directions. Fortunately, they did not harass us; otherwise,

we would be in a dilemma: Should we defend the farms with our lives or simply flee?”

With a heavy expression, Xiao Yuetan asserted: “We must retreat at once, for they will discover the secret tunnel sooner or later. When that happens, we would be trapped.”

Xiang Shaolong decided: “Let’s leave in batches. No matter what, I must stay put until the last minute and leave only when the enemy is finally attacking. Zhou Wei has already lost her only kin, her elder brother. I cannot allow her to lose her beloved husband too!”

Tu Xian burst out laughing: “If we must leave, let’s leave together. Let this be a test of Heaven’s goodwill.”

Mounting the fortifications, Xiang Shaolong and the others examined the enemy formations that are spread before their eyes like a tree of fireflies.

The difference in their strengths is mind-blowing. Any resistance would be futile.

Furthermore, Xiang Shaolong and his team have been riding for days and nights. In their weakened state, engaging the adversaries can only result in defeat.

Teng Yi analyzed: “Judging from the battle formation, Wei Liao is truly a military genius.”

Xiao Yuetan sighed: “Yingzheng is thoroughly prepared for this assault. By deploying these border guards who are not related to Shaolong, I believe they themselves are unaware that they are attacking Wu Fortress.”

At this juncture, Jing Jun ran up to them and announced: “We are all set. Shall we bring the horses to the secret cave? With them, it would be easier to make our getaway.”

Ji Yanran proposed: “Why don’t we place the horses near the entrance of the secret tunnel? Take it as our last effort to assist Wu Guo and the others. After all, it is better than being surrounded and without a means of escape.”

Everybody kept quiet and stared at Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong acknowledged the wisdom of his pretty wife.

If they wanted to transport six hundred people, horses and provisions through the passageway in complete silence, they would require at least four hours.

He reluctantly agreed: “All right!”

Jing Jun left to execute his order.

Out of a sudden, Teng Yi violently shuddered: “Yingzheng is here; Wu Guo and the rest are finished.”

Reeling with shock, the rest of the group followed his gaze. Together, they

witnessed a never-ending procession of torches that resembles a fire dragon. From afar, these new entrants proceeded straight into the tent of the enemy General.

Xiang Shaolong conclusively barked: "Retreat at once."

DONG! DONG! DONG!

The sound of war drums echoed throughout the air.

Everyone exchanged glances with one another. Yingzheng had obviously travelled nonstop throughout the night. Without even stopping for a break or a drink, he instantly commenced the attack, clearly demonstrating his determination in killing Xiang Shaolong.

In a distressed tone, Xiang Shaolong vexed: "Xiao Pan! You are too heartless!"

Ji Yanran hollered: "Abandon the horses! We can only rely on our feet to make our escape. Otherwise, it will be too late."

Acknowledging her command, everyone started moving accordingly.

Watching the enemy soldiers advance from all directions in an overwhelming manner, their hearts sank straight to the bottom.

Chapter 12

At The Brink Of Death

By the time the fortress gates are breached, half of Xiang Shaolong's followers have yet to enter the tunnel. Exasperated, Xiang Shaolong ordered them to squeeze themselves into the newly constructed mausoleum as a form of concealment. At the same time, he sealed the extra-thick steel double doors of the mausoleum, hoping to buy as much time as possible.

It would be ideal if Xiao Pan was misled into thinking that they had left and gave up the search.

But at the back of their minds, everyone knew that this is just their wistful thinking.

When the occupants of a huge fortress have suddenly vanished, there must be a secret passageway that will lead them out of the fortress.

If Wei Liao fails to uncover the passageway, he would not be able to account himself to the newly coronated King of Qin.

Within the mausoleum, everyone is eyeing one another with anxiety. Watching the warriors enter the secret tunnel one by one, they could faintly pick up chaotic noises of war cries and hoof beats. Despite feeling restless and agitated, as if their hearts are on fire, they could only put their trust in the Will of Heaven.

Sounds of 'LONG! LONG!' resounded continuously. Apparently, the invaders are breaking down doors and conducting a search.

PONG!

Right before their eyes, the steel door is finally being hammered. The evil clutches of the enemy has ultimately found its way to this place.

After a round of pointless bashing, silence enveloped the mausoleum.

The hearts of Xiang Shaolong's followers are now stuck at their throats and they are having difficulty breathing.

They could easily predict the next move of the enemy. By tying a large log to a cart, the enemies can fashion a battering ram and use it to break the door down.

The next fifteen minutes felt like a century.

Putting themselves at the back of the queue, Xiang Shaolong, Ji Yanran, Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Tu Xian and ten odd Wu Family Special Forces members are armed with their crossbows, ready to defend the mausoleum with their lives. By holding back the enemies, more of their compatriots can make it to safety.

No one is in the mood to talk.

At this juncture, besides them, there are about thirty followers who had yet

to enter the secret passageway.

Fortunately, during the early days of construction, special attention was being paid to the tunnel ventilation. Otherwise, with so many people crammed in the tunnel, they would suffocate to death before reaching the exit.

Xiang Shaolong unconsciously glanced upwards at the center of the tall worshipping altar. Gazing at the ancestral tablet of Xiao Pan's birth mother Lady Ni, he resentfully smiled to himself. He thought: Ni'er, did this ever cross your mind; that one day, I, Xiang Shaolong, will be personally killed in cold blood by your beloved son.

HONG!

The entire mausoleum shook once but the steel doors remained intact.

HONG!

The three steel door fasteners that are securing the steel doors started to bend inwards and there is now a gap between the double doors. Through the gap, the light from fire torches can be seen and the battle cries are even more realistic than before. Like waves hitting the shore, the enemy soldiers are shouting incessantly into the mausoleum.

Luckily, by this time, Xiang Shaolong and his companions are the only ones who are left in the mausoleum. The rest of them have entered the tunnels.

Xiang Shaolong bellowed: “Get in! Quick!”

Of course nobody dare to be sluggish. Like bees returning to their nests, everybody scrambled for the tunnels.

Before they could replace the steel cover for the secret tunnel, a giant HONG! sound rang out. Both the enormous steel doors collapsed onto the ground, taking with them part of the brick walls. Momentarily, the mausoleum is shrouded with dust.

The four individuals Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Ji Yanran stood guard by the tunnel entrance, ready to kill whoever that trespasses.

They had to do this.

Presently, the tunnel is filled with people. If the enemies begin to pursue them from the back, everyone would be slaughtered.

The more they can delay the enemy and prevent them from understanding the tunnel layout, the greater chances of survival the others would have.

The light from a fire torch is shining down the tunnel.

Xiang Shaolong and the others stepped backwards, avoiding the illumination of the torch.

A man excitedly shouted: “The entrance is here! They did not even have enough time to put the steel cover back.”

Xiang Shaolong and the others groaned to themselves. Out of the blue, beyond the passageway, the entire mausoleum became completely silent.

Next, sounds of kneeling and paying of respects is heard.

Although Xiang Shaolong and his companions are itching with curiosity, they are equally terrified. However, there is nothing they can do.

This man must be Wei Liao.

Yingzheng is amazingly quiet.

POK!

That was the sound of someone kneeling down.

From the edge of the tunnel entrance, Li Si's quivering voice sounded: "Great King, please have mercy!"

Wei Liao was astonished: "Chief Officer?"

What followed was another round of mysterious silence.

Wei Liao's voice sounded again: "Great King, please give the order at once. Otherwise, if we miss this opportunity, it will be lost forever."

He then dryly coughed once and wondered: "Why is Great King staring at the worshipping altar and the ancestral tablets?"

In the hearts of Xiang Shaolong and the other three, an indescribable feeling is beginning to emerge. Xiao Pan must be quietly gazing at the tablet of his beloved mother Lady Ni.

Except for the four of them, the others should have crossed the halfway point of the tunnel. In another thirty minutes, the evacuation would be complete.

Nonetheless, if Xiao Pan takes up Wei Liao's suggestion, everybody will still end up dead.

The familiar voice of Xiao Pan finally sounded: "Official Wei and the others, Guaren hereby command that you retreat from this room at once. Only Official Li shall remain."

Wei Liao was stunned: "Great King..."

Xiao Pan roared: "Get out!"

The sound of footsteps was heard.

Once his soldiers are out of earshot, Xiao Pan questioned in a deep voice: "How can we prevent the world from talking about this incident?"

Li Si answered: "After Great King has conquered the six States and united the lands, Great King can issue a nationwide decree, prohibiting anyone from mentioning the three words: Xiang Shaolong. Violators will be beheaded at once. This would certainly make everyone stop talking about him and the

problem will be resolved accordingly.”

Xiao Pan coldly hissed: “If they did not talk about him but recorded him in historical documents, what should we do?”

Li Si replied: “Great King can burn their books and bury the authors alive.”

Below them, Xiang Shaolong is absolutely flabbergasted, never expecting himself to be the reason for Qin Shihuang to burn books and bury scholars alive. Concurrently, he realizes that the burning of the Book of Wu Pu is to deny the public of valuable knowledge.

Xiao Pan grilled: “Nevertheless, how should we explain the killing of Lu Buwei by Xiang Shaolong?”

His voice becoming louder, Li Si proclaimed: “It is really simple. The explanation is: To escape punishment, Lu Buwei fled back to his territory of Shiyi where he eventually committed suicide by drinking poisonous wine.”

Footsteps sounded again and someone came to the edge of the tunnel entrance.

After a short spell of silence, Xiao Pan’s voice lightly expressed: “Master! May you have a safe journey!”

Following that, Xiao Pan decisively thundered: “Retreat at once!”

The footsteps trailed off.

Unable to hold back any longer, the hot tears of Xiang Shaolong overflowed his eye sockets.

In his heart, he could feel the immense agitation of creating a crucial episode of history.

The minute Xiao Pan steps out of his mother's mausoleum, he would no longer be the Zhao Xiao Pan from Handan.

Because he would have completely severed his past and become a true blue Yingzheng. In the future, all his energies will be expended on the grand scheme of conquering the world.

The instance he crosses the fallen steel doors, the six States are destined to be eliminated one after another.

Their opponent is the unshakable super conqueror – the founder of China, the bearer of the title: One in a millennium Emperor, Qin Shihuang Yingzheng.

Recomposing their emotions, Xiang Shaolong and his companions caught up to the main body by going through and exiting the tunnel. To their astonishment, they spotted Wu Guo and the Guardians among them.

It turned out that they were forced to take the roads after Lord Changwen barricaded the river route. As a result, they ended up arriving several hours after Yingzheng. Coincidentally, they ran into the others near the tunnel exit.

At the same time, Wu Guo brought updates from Wang Jian. Lao Ai was sentenced to death by having his body torn apart by five carriages and the two sons of Zhu Ji and Lao Ai were burnt alive.

Zhu Ji herself was escorted back to Xianyang.

Of course everyone knows that the real Zhu Ji is dead. The Zhu Ji that is returning to Xianyang and subsequently placed under house arrest is merely an imposter conjured by Yingzheng.

After the withdrawal of Yingzheng's massive army, everyone returned to the farms and mounted their horses before leaving again.

Xiang Shaolong did not forget to bring along the ancestral tablets of Zhao Qian, Lady Ni and the other ladies.

Three months later, they finally arrived safely at the borderlands, fulfilling their long awaited dream.

Chapter 13

United States of China

As the rebellion forces of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai are mainly staffed by foreigners from the six States, coupled with Zhengguo Canal being exposed as a trick by Han to destroy Qin, on top of Yingzheng's worry that the foreigners from the six States will continue to propagate 'rumours', Yingzheng implemented an 'anti foreigner' policy despite the mounting protests from his officials, instantly endangering foreign guests from the eastern States.

Li Si is fully conscious that he knows too much for his own good. Nonetheless, he is highly supportive of Yingzheng's dream to unite the States. At the risk of his life, he submitted the following report:

"When subordinate heard that the Court of Qin has decided to implement anti-foreigner policies, I felt that this move is inappropriate! In the past, Duke Lao was seeking talent. From the west, he recruited You Yu from Rong; east, Baili Xi from Wan; welcomed Jian Shu from Song; and embraced Pei Bao and Gongsun Zi from Jing. None of these five men are originally from Qin but with their support, Duke Lao was able to occupy more than twenty States, forming the Kingdom of West Rong.

Using the laws of Shang Yang, Duke Xiao reformed local customs and manners, causing the population to greatly flourish and the country to grow rich and powerful. The population rejoiced, and the feudal lords were

subjugated. Obtaining experts from Wei and Chu, they gained sway over thousands of miles of land, and to this day their governance was strong.

King Hui used the stratagems of Zhang Yi and seized the three river plains areas. In the west, he consolidated the states of Ba and Shu. In the north, he governed Shangjun, while in the south he took over Hanzhong. He embraced the nine barbarian tribes, and regulated Yan and Shao. He seized the dangerous passes to the east, which were easy to guard and made them hard to attack, cutting off the fertile land. He dispersed the alliance of the Six Eastern Powers, and made the west solely dominated by Qin. His accomplishments persisted to this very day.

Enlisting the help of Fan Wei, King Zao promoted him to the position of Marquis Xiang and disposed of Hua Yang, thereby strengthening the court administration and weed out corruption. By eradicating the feudal lords, King Zao is able to consolidate his authority.

The success of these four kings is undeniably linked to their reliance on foreign talents.

Regardless of perspective, these foreign advisors did not disappoint!

If the opposite had happened, for example, the four kings condemned these foreigners to lowly positions and did not exploit their capabilities, Qin will not stand to gain from their expertise and can never be as strong as today.

Additionally, this policy is not carefully researched and there is no distinction between truth and fiction. There is no basis to discriminate between citizens

and non-citizens of Qin. Ultimately, the emphasis should be on genuine talent and not nationality. Thus, this policy is flawed."

From the frank and open assessment that Li Si had presented, besides exhibiting his undying loyalty to Yingzheng, it clearly elaborates ironclad truths and facts.

Finally, Yingzheng retracted his decree and abolished the 'anti foreigner' policy.

At the same time, Han Fei, the old friend of Xiang Shaolong and Ji Yanran, was forcefully invited to Qin.

However, his loyalty lies with his birth State and he spoke up for Han on several occasions. Due to his ineloquence, he failed to get into the good books of Yingzheng. Eventually, he offended Yao Jia and Li Si, and with the two men jealous of his talent, Han Fei was poisoned to death in prison.

After eradicating Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, Yingzheng consolidated his authority over Qin and subsequently began his conquest of the other six States.

Alone by themselves, none of the six States can withstand the might of Qin.

But if they worked in hand in hand, it is not impossible to give Qin a run for their money. For example, six years after Yingzheng's coronation, Qin suffered a crushing defeat against the allied forces of Chu and the Three States. However, Han Chuang was down on his luck and perished during the skirmish.

Without Lu Buwei backing him, Tian Dan lost power. From then on, there are no more distinguished talents from Qi.

Learning his lesson the hard way, Yingzheng switched to employing strategies recommended by Li Si and Wei Liao. In an intricate manner, he exploited the three methods of bribery, sowing of discord and divide and conquer to destroy the six States.

Fourteen years into Yingzheng's reign, King An of Han was the first to yield to Qin. The next year, the armies of Qin embarked on a killing spree and conquered Han.

Personally trained by Xiang Shaolong, Heng Qi (Huan Qi) was promoted to Great General after accumulating a ton of merits. Unfortunately, he pitted himself against Li Mu, the gifted general who devastated the army of Xiang Shaolong. After incurring huge losses at He Fei and ashamed to face Yingzheng, Heng Qi fled to Yan.

Finally, it has boiled down to a war between the two renowned generals Wang Jian and Li Mu.

Under the leadership of Wang Jian and Yang Duanhe, the armies of Qin launched a massive campaign against Zhao. Meeting them outside Handan City, Li Mu engaged their forces and their fights resulted in a deadlock. Bewitched by Li Si's sowing of discord, Guo Kai went to the extent of persuading the King of Zhao to switch Li Mu with another general. Refusing to accept the switch, Li Mu was executed by the King of Zhao.

With the passing of a giant, there are no generals in Zhao who could stand up to Wang Jian. Like a gust of strong wind sweeping the fallen leaves, the armies of Qin swept Zhao into the memories of history.

After Yingzheng ruled for nineteen years, Prince Dan sent Jingke into Qin and tried to assassinate him. Failing in his mission, Jingke was mutilated and killed.

Finding a reason to counterattack, Yingzheng dispatched Wang Jian to Yan. After soundly defeating the armies of Yan at the west of River Yi, the next year, Wang Jian occupied Ji, the capital of Yan and killed Prince Dan.

With his son Wang Ben, Wang Jian went on to dominate more than ten cities of Chu. The next year, Wang Jian demonstrated his legendary abilities once again. By breaking a dam and flooding Daliang, he effortlessly erases Wei off the map of China.

Twenty three years into Yingzheng's reign, Wang Jian began invading Chu and inflicted heavy casualties to the army of Chu at Pingyu. The next year, Meng Wu successfully overran Shouchun. The King of Chu and Li Yuan ended up as prisoners of war while Li Yanyan committed suicide by poisoning herself, heralding the demise of Chu.

Twenty six years after Yingzheng became the King of Qin, Wang Ben breached the defenses of Lin Zi. Tian Jian, the King of Qi, surrendered unconditionally.

From this point onwards, the vanquished six States are like a cloud of

dissipating smoke. At the end of the day, all their lands are now part of Qin.

Recollecting Xiang Shaolong's suggested caption of 'Shihuang Emperor', Yingzheng instructed his officials to evaluate the feasibility of this title now that he has united the whole of China.

Everyone is naturally full of praise and approval.

Therefore, Yingzheng gave himself the title of Shihuang Emperor. Removing the structure of marquises and lords, Yingzheng divided China into thirty six provinces. Confiscating all the weapons of China to safeguard himself, Yingzheng also constructed twelve golden statues in his likeness to remind the people of his authority. At the same time, he standardized the weights and measurement, road widths and carriage sizes of China. Yingzheng is also responsible for issuing a single currency for the whole country and deciding the language medium for all forms of communication. Finally, he resettled the richest one hundred and twenty thousand households to Xianyang

Indirectly, he has established the model for the future of China.

When Yingzheng ascends the Emperor throne as Shihuang Emperor, the majestic Huai Qing Platform is simultaneously being constructed.

The common folks are under the impression that their Emperor is building this to commemorate Widow Qing.

Only those in the know like Li Si and Wang Jian are aware that Yingzheng is actually building it to commemorate Xiang Shaolong who is far away from the Central Plains.

Epilogue

Under the flying hooves of the horse, the ground rapidly fades towards the back.

With three of his brothers Wu Zhuo, Teng Yi and Jing Jun, Xiang Shaolong is riding at full speed on the fresh and crisp grassland that stretches as far as the eye can see.

Under the blue sky and white clouds, about half a mile in front of them, a herd of nearly one thousand wild horses are startled and instantly fled towards the north.

The four men started shouting. Squeezing the abdomen of their horses to change directions, they continued the pursuit.

Xiang Shaolong and his fellow riders divided themselves into two teams.

One team started flanking the wild horses from the side, forcing the leading alpha horse to change their flight path while the other team persisted in hounding the horses from the back.

After a short chase, the herd is intimidated by their horsewhips and had no choice but to jump into the river and swim towards the opposite shore.

Reining his horse to a stop, Xiang Shaolong thundered: "Kids! It is time to display your talents."

On the opposite shore, more than a hundred men suddenly appeared with ropes in their hands, enthusiastically waiting for the horses to walk right into their arms. Among them are Wu Guo, Wu Yan Zhe, Zhao Da and Liu Chao.

Observing his brothers and men capturing wild horses with plenty of excitement, Xiang Shaolong praised: “First Brother is truly talented in picking a good territory. This location comprises of countless rivers and streams which is useful for farming and drinking. With bountiful water supply, fertile soil and limitless grazing grass, this is a piece of paradise.”

His eyes scanning the endless fields around him, Wu Guo inhaled a breath of fragrant grass smell and chuckled: “When I first came here, I did not feel good because I have this impression that we are forced to come here, like a self-imposed exile. But after living here for so many years, only death can force me to leave this place.”

Jing Jun suddenly barked to the men on the opposite shore: “That pure white horse! I want that pure white horse!”

Teng Yi was tickled: “This fellow, Dan’er has given him three sons and two daughters and yet, he himself is like a kid who has never grown up.”

At evening time, the men are satisfied with a rewarding day and started riding back to the hunting camp.

Ji Yanran, Qin Qing, Wu Tingfang, Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen, Tian Feng, Zhou Wei, Shan Lan, Lu Dan’er and the other ladies are sitting on a slope, overlooking a group of more than thirty boys and girls aged between ten and fifteen years

old. The children are riding their horses and playing polo on a grass meadow.

The air is filled with laughter.

One of the children is Xiang Bao'er.

He is much more brawny compared to the other kids. Wearing a beautiful cap made from eagle feathers, coupled with his thick brows and large eyes, he is already an outstanding character.

At this moment, he happened to bend down from his horse and use his mallet to dribble the ball. Under his skillful maneuvers, no one could snatch the polo ball from him.

Beneath their feet, like a shimmering green carpet, the boundless grass prairie seems to extend all the way to heaven.

A distance away, more than a hundred tents are clustered together. As the smoke rises from the cooking stoves, more than ten ladies are starting a fire and preparing a meal for their husbands and sons to enjoy later.

Nearby, the two men Tu Xian and Xiao Yuetan are sitting on the ground and chatting idly with each other. Occasionally, they would throw a glance at the polo-playing children.

The game is now reaching a point of excitement and the spectating ladies clapped and cheered nonstop. Among them, Wu Tingfang and Lu Dan'er cheered the loudest.

Out of the blue, Qin Qing nudged Ji Yanran who is sitting down beside her. She joyfully exclaimed: “Hubby is back.”

Shifting their gaze to the edge of the horizon, the group of ladies spotted more than a hundred black dots that are gradually becoming bigger and bigger. The sound of hoof beats is also faintly discernable.

Feeling in the mood, Ji Yanran stood up and hollered in her shrill voice: “I am going out to welcome our victorious warriors; who is with me?”

The children have already abandoned their game. With some of them riding ahead and some riding at the back, they are heading towards the approaching horsemen.

The sound of hoof beats reverberated thorough the air.

Ji Yanran’s invitation is instantly taken up by everyone. Running to and mounting their horses, it wasn’t too long until the ladies met up with their partners on the grasslands. Together, they rode back to camp.

Riding in front, the children are proudly leading the way back.

Slowing cantering beside Ji Yanran and Qin Qing, an emotional Xiang Shaolong gushed: “Heaven is indeed kind to us. In the past, I cannot imagine myself leading such a blissful and worry-free life.”

Qin Qing sighed: “Because of our past experiences, we are able to appreciate the value of living freely on the grasslands. Unlike that little fellow Bao’er; he

kept whining and expressed his desire to return to the Central Plains and see the world.”

Wu Tingfang nagged: “In the future, you better not tell him any more stories about the Central Plains, especially about Chu. Bao’er has developed a liking for that place, how mysterious!”

Xiang Shaolong chortled: “Every person has his or her own dreams. Because our dreams are fulfilled, we are contented with our lives. Bao’er is merely pursuing his dream! We should never try to stop him from pursuing his interests and must never force him to live according to our expectations of him.”

Ji Yanran is exhilarated: “Hubby’s words are really moving. Bao’er’s dream is to become an eagle in the sky, able to spread his wings and fly to any place he desires.”

Zhao Zhi guffawed: “Everyone is pampering him without any reservations! In my opinion, Little Zhen and Little Feng are the worst culprits!”

Teased by Zhao Zhi, Tian Zhen and Tian Feng are covering their mouths and giggling. Happiness is written all over their faces.

As if she suddenly remembered something, Ji Yanran smiled: “I nearly forgot to tell you something, Father of Bao’er. Bao’er finds his name too childish and wishes to change it.”

Unconcerned, Xiang Shaolong was thrilled: “As long as his surname is Xiang, he can choose whichever name he wants.”

Pretending to be angry, Wu Tingfang protested: “The name Bao’er is my suggestion; it is his birth name!”

Ji Yanran continued: “Noting his love for eagles, I recommended him to use the name Eagle (Ying).”

Xiang Shaolong burst out laughing: “Xiang Ying! That’s quite a nice name!”

Qin Qing gently rebuked: “As a father, you do not understand your son well enough. He finds the word ‘Eagle’ too aggressive and beast-like. Moreover, others will make jokes about his name. He has decided on the word: Yu.”

Violently shaken, Xiang Shaolong reined his horse to a stop and unconsciously shouted: “What!”

The ladies, Teng Yi and the rest were stunned into stopping with him. All the attention is now focused on Xiang Shaolong.

In his mind, Xiang Shaolong is experiencing wave after wave of tsunamis.

Xiang Yu?

Isn’t he the man who fought against Liu Bang for control over the entire China? And who eventually committed suicide by jumping into River Wu with the beauty Yu Ji? The one and only Chu Great Conqueror Xiang Yu?

What is going on?

Could it be merely a coincidence in their names?

Taking time into account, the probability is quite strong.

From the records of history, the Qin dynasty ended after two emperors.

Thirty seven years after Yingzheng became the King of Qin, he died of illness at Saqiu when he was touring the southern provinces. After him, the second Emperor perished three years later. At that point in time, Xiang Shaolong's son Xiang Yu is in his early thirties, the prime of his youth.

The cries of everybody brought Xiang Shaolong back to his senses.

Ji Yanran suspiciously probed: "Does Hubby dislike this name? But Bao'er loves it. If you want him to change his mind, leave us out of it. You can speak to him directly."

Recomposing himself, Xiang Shaolong started contemplating. Should he issue a warning to his son Xiang Bao'er? For example, when Bao'er meets a man named Liu Bang, he should unsheathe his sword and kill him at once.

But on the other hand, even though Xiang Shaolong is fully aware of historical developments, at the end of the day, he is unable to change its path.

Destiny is something that cannot be altered by mere willpower and effort.

Humans believe they are charting their lives; that is precisely because they

are unaware of their actual fate. In fact, they are simply living their lives according to fate.

Only Xiang Shaolong is able to fully comprehend this insight.

One of his 'son' Xiao Pan built the Great Qin empire while his other 'son' Xiang Yu personally destroyed the same empire.

Qin Qing frowned: "What is Hubby thinking about!"

Abruptly breaking out into laughter, Xiang Shaolong replied: "I have thought through it and came to an understanding."

Teng Yi's voice sounded: "What did Third Brother understand?"

Xiang Shaolong joyfully exclaimed: "From this day onwards, Xiang Bao'er shall be Xiang Yu."

The crowd rolled their eyes in unison.

With a baffled expression, Ji Yanran enquired: "What is there to understand about changing one's name?"

From her back, Xiang Shaolong leaned forward to her face and inhaled her fragrance. He laughed: "I understood one point. If you succeeded, so what? And if you failed, so what? Success and failure are irrelevant. The most important thing is to lead a fulfilling and extraordinary life, inscribing your everlasting name in the records of history. That indeed, is a life worth living!"

Even more puzzled than before, the crowd could never guess that he is referring to his own son eventually becoming the legendary and illustrious Chu Great Conqueror Xiang Yu.

Letting out a burst of heroic laughter, Xiang Shaolong prodded his horse and started chasing up to Xiang Yu and the other children.

Everyone swiftly resounded and nudged their horses in pursuit.

Under the magnificent and colourful sunset, the humans and horses seemed to have merged into one body with Mother Nature, depicting a heavenly and ecstatic painting.

~ THE END ~